Sing, Sweet Cicada

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by JBauchley

Summary

What happened in that apartment? People would ask about it, even years later, the rumors living forever.

Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter were nothing more than roommates, right? In the beginning, it all seemed so innocent. How did everything spiral out of control? Was it the rebirth of evil, or something else entirely?

Notes

1. This story starts after Digestivo, prior to the 'breakup' scene. It is inspired by the idea of an alternate becoming.

2. You may find yourself asking, how? Magic. Always, magic.

3. Will is younger—late 20s, let’s say. Hannibal’s age remains canon-compliant.

4. Your feedback is the life force of my writing.

5. I hope you enjoy ❤️

THE CARAPACE

1.

The malevolent awakening, which would take a total of two years—two years and three months to be exact—began, so far as they knew, with a small corner of red wallpaper that peeled up inside the lobby of a historic apartment building. It waited patiently for the new tenants, ready to reveal what was beneath the blood-colored veil. The building, mysterious and ominous, was preparing itself to serve as host to a new era.

Eventually, they would look back and speak of that time in careless anecdotes, only sharing small snippets associated with good memories. They would start with the phrase *"I remember when,"* plucking out joyous moments to tell people at parties, but in truth, the entire tale was far too sinister to share with the average person. It was a story that only Will and Hannibal knew in full detail, and they would keep it a safe secret, the black thorn inside their red beating hearts.

The corner of Berry & N 8th Street was the location of an old shoe polish factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It was a burnt orange brick building, renovated in the late '70s after the infamous blackouts—the old interior gutted and refurbished, the exterior still maintaining the original architecture. As Will Graham crossed the street, headed toward the block that contained the complex, he felt that cast iron cornices, littered in tiny cherubs and gargoyles, were more blue than black under the vivid summer sky.

The city bustled. Sounds of car horns and sirens bounced against one another like clamoring dishes. People passed the crosswalk in their own little worlds, having conversations on their mobiles that grew louder on approach then slowly faded away. Everyone maintained their space, however, giving more room than usual to avoid the radiation of furnaced bodies.

There had been an ongoing heatwave for a week now, temperatures reaching the high 80s, and for the past few days, there wasn't even the hint of wind.

Will's white t-shirt clung to the patch of sweaty skin between his shoulder blades as he carried a relatively heavy cardboard box in his arms. A droplet exited his brown curls, rolling down his temple, and he lifted his shoulder to wipe it away. Even through the cotton, the sun beat harshly on his body, feeling to him like a burn. The box's sharp corners dug into his finger pads even through his unwavering grip, creating painful pink creases.

He was excited to get inside, not just to finally see the apartment's interior, which had only been conceptualized through Hannibal's description, but because he was tired and hot and ready to sit down for a minute. There would be no furniture in there yet, but it didn't matter. A cool hardwood floor was good enough for him.

Hannibal was two steps ahead, a bright green grocery tote dangling from one hand, the other clutching an amber glass lamp, cord wrapped around the base, missing its shade. Will assumed that the muscular biceps that bulged through the thin grey shirt couldn't carry more

than that since there was much more to bring, yet the man had chosen only those two small items.

Wouldn't want to overexert yourself—he thought.

Will would have rolled his eyes if he had the energy. Truthfully, he was also grateful, and he would save any exasperation he had for something more serious down the line. Right now, he was receiving a gift.

Hannibal had procured the apartment they were now headed toward with somewhat seamless ease. The purchase was conducted through several long phone calls on their journey from Wolf Trap. Hannibal had used several different languages, speaking calmly in the passenger seat while the radio played low, Will driving with one hand draped over the wheel, the old world passing by in rushes. They hadn't packed much—only what they could fit into the Volvo. It was funny how easily things could be discarded, how very few items Will ended up attached to from his old life. So much fell by the wayside, and everything he wanted fit perfectly in that car.

They would start a new life now—little did they know what was waiting for them.

The two men met the sidewalk, and Will careened back to look up at the facade of his new home. It was unassuming, rustic heritage meeting metropolitan necessity. A large tree grew up the side of the building, lush with green leaves, unmoved in the stale heat. About halfway down the building, a dark mahogany door with iron locks down the side was set back from the sidewalk, two steps leading up to it.

The entrance.

Before the door, there was a coffee shop with large glass windows under a brown awning, SAMSARA stenciled across the front. Beyond the door, a small liquor & wine store was lit up by a bright yellow sign with maroon letters.

When they came to the entrance, Hannibal put the contents of one hand into the other, fumbling through his pocket to find the assortment of keys that were now theirs—three linked together on a silver ring. First, to the building entrance, golden and shiny. Second, to the elevator, small, thin, and silver. Third, to the apartment door, brass, large and rigid—all of them bearing an etched number 437 in the flat heads.

A young man hosed off the sidewalk in front of the liquor mart, cooling the pavement and sending water and cigarette butts down into the gutter below. As Will waited for Hannibal to unlock the door, he felt the effervescent misty spray on his body, almost having to close his eyes at the slight relief. It was like stepping into the shade, refreshing in more ways than he could describe.

He peered over at the young man, lanky yet stout, forearms stippled in pale hairs, a rose tattoo adorning his neck, wearing a rolled black beanie despite the heat. Will considered him—a satirical representation of the area. The people of Brooklyn were intriguing, vivid, each one a small stamp of individuality in an ever-expanding universe. Usually, Will found cities

to be nauseating, but something about this place was comforting, real even in the face of its irony.

The young man caught Will's gaze and smiled sweetly, offering a coy wink. Will nodded back hesitantly, then twisted his brow in confusion as he turned back to the door, not generally receiving that response when caught mid stare.

Hannibal continued to fumble with the locked door.

How long does it take to insert a key?

"The guy said it's the gold one," Will offered, somewhat impatient, peering around Hannibal's shoulder.

"I know," Hannibal replied, switching from the silver key to the gold one.

Will smiled to himself. He shrugged his shoulder again to wipe another trickling bead of sweat from the side of his face.

The word around town was that the worst of the heat was over. The weather report claimed that the temperature was steadily declining, and by next weekend, the city would see balmy days with pleasant breezes. In the meantime, the water was the only consolation. Not that Will minded so much. He came from the heat. He knew how to endure it. But for a second, he worried about Hannibal.

Use to the Baltimore climate, coming from the colder regions of Europe, Will had never really seen Hannibal in the heat. Not that he hadn't experienced it, but it was interesting to witness. Sophisticated layered suits exchanged for less clothing and thinner fabrics, which were still dapper, to say the least. Silent breaths now barreled through his monstrous lungs in deep rhythm. Clubmaster sunglasses with tortoiseshell temples were continually engaged. The back of the large man's neck was beaded in sweat, his skin glistening like tawny gemstones, and Will quickly blinked away when he wondered, somewhat subconsciously, what it tasted like.

Hannibal finally succeeded at his menial, if not complicated, task. He stepped inside, Will following behind, and as they did, the young man next door sprayed his hose slightly too close to Will's feet. Will turned over his shoulder to look at him.

"Have fun," The young man said, his smile turning sly.

What the hell does that mean?

"You too."

You too?

Will huffed a sigh of embarrassment and entered the lobby, kicking the door closed behind him.

The space was elegant—more beautiful on the interior than Will had previously imagined. It was slightly cooler than outside, but only because it was shaded. Was the building air-conditioned? It had to be—right? Hannibal was paying enough for it. Maybe it was broken or hadn't been turned on. Or maybe the lobby wasn't, but the apartment was. Will would soon find out. He looked around.

The floors were slick stone, white with bending lines of brown and grey, and Hannibal's shoes gave off enough echo to sound like he was walking into a chapel. Will looked up to the white plaster tiled ceiling, chandeliers dangling incrementally from the squares. The saffron sun hit the tiny crystal prisms and refracted out in multiple specks of color, almost speaking to each other. The walls were covered in embossed red wallpaper, the glossy filigree swirling around like a two-dimensional fairytale forest.

A wood staircase hugged the right wall, leading up to the various floors. Elevators, both personal and service, sat to the left along with the tin set of mailboxes. Only five other apartments in the building, Will counted as he walked passed. Their apartment was the only one on the fourth floor, Hannibal had explained, a penthouse of sorts.

Will stopped along a wall near the mailboxes, eyes caught on a small patch of white. The only dilapidated section of the pristine hallway was a corner less than six inches wide where the red wallpaper had started to peel up. Will paused, shifting the box in his arms. He brought his fingertip to the edge of the frayed paper, flipping it back only slightly to see the dried, yellowing glue. His brow furrowed.

Who hadn't fixed this? It was a simple thing to repair and quite glaringly obvious that it needed to be. He smoothed it back down, but the corner popped up again, unable to retain the intended pressure Will placed on it. He wiped another trickle of sweat from his face.

There was something about that corner—the way it revealed the wall underneath. Will didn't like it—at all. He put his finger to it once more, trying to tack it down, but it would not be swayed. It was defiant, determined, almost taunting Will, whispering that eventually, every square inch would have to be pulled up to reveal the ugly, naked wall.

It was an odd sensation—like something itching inside his sternum. Actually, it did itch. Will brought his hand to his chest and rubbed hard.

How strange.

Of course, he wanted to describe it to Hannibal, later perhaps, but the feeling was one he had experienced recently. It reminded him of the last night in Wolf Trap—the night before he decided to leave with Hannibal. He blinked hard a few times, twitching as he tried to keep that memory from resurfacing. He didn't like talking about that night. Didn't like thinking about it. Everything that happened that night, and into the early hours of the morning, seemed unspeakable.

Maybe he wouldn't bring up the wallpaper because Hannibal would want to talk about it and, by extension, talk about the night Wolf Trap. It was easy enough to tell Hannibal something—to explain feelings and thoughts—but often, Hannibal saw things in Will's words, things that Will would rather not know.

"Will?" Hannibal beckoned.

"Yeah?" Will said, turning quickly.

"The elevator is here."

"Coming."

Will walked over quickly, stepping into the carriage, and Hannibal drew the gold vintage door closed in a low screech. He pressed the number four button, glowing yellow, and the elevator began its ascension. It wasn't fast, by anyone's standard, but there was no stopping it once it started. They'd learn that over time. The emergency button was really more of a decoration than anything. It didn't work—ever. There was leaver toward the ceiling that engaged the break just in case of a plummet, so that was nice, but throughout their stay in that building, Will's hate for that machine would ebb and flow.

The rails and cables rattled, squeaking the bolts like noisome bells, and the two men approached the fourth floor—the location that would breed horrific and gruesome change.

2.

The elevator opened directly to the apartment. Hannibal unlocked the front door, much swifter this time—seeing as he was out of keys to choose from—and Will dropped his box inside the marble-floored foyer, pressing his shoes off, toe to heel.

His eyes shot around the space. Just beyond the entry, a hall led to the left and right, a bedroom at each end. Will assumed he would take the one to the left, the smaller of the two, but he wasn't picky. He would let Hannibal choose first.

Will walked through the arching open doorway leading to the living room. A boxspring and bare mattress sat in the center of the floor. Something leftover, he imagined. A Victorian fireplace was the room's centerpiece, and large casement windows lined the exposed brick wall, shedding summer light onto the oak flooring. He sat down on the mattress as Hannibal opened the box in the foyer, withdrawing the thin folded blanket from the top.

"This is nice," Will said, still looking around.

"I thought you'd like it," Hannibal replied, dropping the blanket to the end of the meg-shift bed. "The couch will be placed there." He pointed toward the empty space across from the fireplace. "And the dining room is there—the kitchen just there." He gestured to the doors to the left and right, respectively.

It was beautiful, posh yet simple. Empty, yes, but the movers would bring more tomorrow. There were a dozen more boxes of clothing and personal items from the sublet and the furniture they ordered from Perigold, 200 Lex, and several smaller antique stores.

What an interesting adventure that had been. The one thing more daunting than moving in with Hannibal was shopping with Hannibal.

At the very large, very expensive, very much a joke of itself, store, Hannibal was welcomed with open arms while Will was merely side-eyed. It was probably the ripped jeans and messy hair. That's what Will guessed, anyway. Hannibal was very clear about the fact that they were there to spend large amounts of money, and that's when Will suddenly became a god.

"Oh, absolutely." The associate had said, shifting personalities in mere seconds. "We would be more than happy to assist you both today."

Of course you would—Will thought, blinking over an eye roll.

"Would either of you like a glass of wine or champagne?"

"No, thank you," Will replied, thinking it was a waste of time and maybe the avoidance would speed the tedious process along.

It didn't.

They split off in pairs. One associate, a curly-haired gentleman wearing a painted blazer, followed Hannibal around like a dog, nose directly up Hannibal's ass, following with a scanner and phrases such as *"that's exquisite"* and *"you have such amazing taste."*

An associate had also followed Will, and they walked around for nearly five whole minutes before Will started pointing to the simple things he wanted, which were few. His associate, a tall raven-haired woman, constantly said things like *"your husband already picked out a bed"* and *"the Mule is nice, but have you seen the Darby? More storage space and ergonomic function."*

"He's not my husband." Will asserted.

"Oh. I'm sorry. Your boyfriend?"

"Nope," Will said, emphasizing the p while fondling a crystal ashtray. "I'll take this too."

The woman scanned the item then glanced over her shoulder to look at Hannibal.

"Pity," She said under her breath.

The expedition lasted nearly four hours before Hannibal found a stopping place, and they could get to the actual transfer of locations. It had been an insanely long day.

Will flopped back onto the mattress, blowing out a sigh as he went. He strummed his fingers on his now damp belly, looking up at the ceiling fan. Just as he thought that they should turn that sucker on, the blades started spinning slowly, and Will tilted his head up to see Hannibal had flicked the switch. It was hot in the apartment too, which was fine. Will just wanted to lay there. He listened to the fan hum softly, the whispering breaths of Hannibal, smelled the slight coffee scent wafting up from downstairs. For all the commotion happening outside, the inside of the apartment was peaceful—as silent as safety.

Will's eyelids started to droop.

He tried not to think too much—tried to just relax. Internal dialogues these days often veered places Will didn't like. Thoughts sometimes sprouted out of nowhere, like the one that emerged when Hannibal sat down on the bed next to him.

You should ask him to lay next to you.

Will's eyes popped open, looking at the broad man sitting beside him. Will shut his eyes tight again. He liked to store those thoughts in a file cabinet labeled *What The Fuck Was That: Do Not Open.* A place he could lock up in his mind.

When another thought came—

You should run your hands up his back

—Will quickly put it in a drawer and slammed the cabinet shut. He didn't even allow the trail of rationality that followed. Rationalizing it gave the thought validity. He preferred to pretend that it didn't exist, that it was entirely random, and that its seeds were rooted in nothing more than proximity.

They'd have to share that bed tonight, and everything would need to be sealed up tight before that happened. At that moment, laying in the heat, the weight of Hannibal's strong body like an anchor, his smell much more fragrant in the humidity, Will wondered if that was even possible. When would these thoughts become urges? When would those urges become actions? It was a slow descent—happening one step at a time. He wasn't sure what he'd do in his sleep, his logical mind not there to shut out temptation.

For some reason, Will suddenly understood why the lobby had made him itch. Peeling back that wallpaper was like peeling back a patch of his own flesh, revealing something deeper than his blood. It was some type of shedding, the cracking of an exoskeleton. He quickly decided that he would keep the sensation to himself and not explain it to Hannibal later, feeling—both simultaneously—that he wanted to ignore it and wanted to foster it.

Will had begun molting, and he didn't even know it.

ONE END OF THE HALL

1.

An amalgam of sticky blackness, opaque and gooey, flicking and shaking, painted splatters as it closed in around his life. It mixed like oil and turpentine, pungent like ammonia, and sucked him downward, closing in around him like quicksand. From the airless pit—six clear words.

Steady your hands before you begin

The thought entered behind Hannibal Lecter's eyelids just before consciousness broke the lull of sleep in a snap. It wasn't a voice, more of his own dreamland monologue, finishing out the words just before the breach of lucidness, then fading out, like a wave retreating from the shore. He opened his eyes, waking on his side, blinking into—what was most certainly now —the afternoon.

His pulse roared, overtaking his ears as the bright midday sun seeped into the dark regions of his liquid mind. For a moment, all he could do was gaze into an empty thought, his faculties slowly returning to him, one by one, making him aware of his physical form.

Even in a listless state, his body ached. Each fleshy fiber of muscle was poisoned and sore. They were tense, taught, yanking on joints now calcified together from dehydration. Movement would surely lubricate them, start the restorative process, but Hannibal could hardly compel himself. Instead, he remained motionless, his dry eyes shifting across the room.

A blazing yellow sun beamed through the multi-pane window that sat behind the bed like a headboard of light. The linen drapes did nothing to block the glow, scattered in clumps at last night's meager attempt to close them. Gilded wisps of dust fluttered through the sharp rays like shimmering snow, cascading off the recessed wall of books. The almost complete collection smelled of old leather and decaying ink, intermixing with the cold adobe of the exposed brick wall, the foundations of the earth giving life to Hannibal's bedroom.

Even through the muffled traffic noise from the streets below, Hannibal could hear the faint ticking of his antique clock, doling out time. He squinted across the room to his desk, reading the small black arms on the crystal quartz face.

Nearly noon.

Waking in an afternoon bed was not something Hannibal did routinely—not something he did at all. It seemed different somehow, warmer, and even though the events were farther away, the echoes of the previous night seemed louder. He blinked again, long and slow. Times such as these, times when most individuals witnessed their burning regrets flashing like a strobe light, Hannibal only recollected images of radiant bliss.

Two wine glasses sat on his nightstand, stained a shade of eggplant purple, the crystal marked by several semi-circle lip prints. He ran his rough tongue against the roof of his parched mouth, teeth still baring the fuzzy remnants of last night's Cabernet.

Two bottles, he recalled. One bottle with dinner, one bottle after dinner, uncorked as the mood shifted into an atmosphere that called for lubrication.

Actually, there were three.

He had forgotten about the third. Opened in an unexpected pop, Hannibal had only conceded to the suggestion because the night was going so well. He was certain they hadn't finished the third one, but those remaining glasses had been swallowed between jovial living room banter and the occasional precarious dance accompanied by music from the record player.

So much of it seemed both arranged and spontaneous, the occurrences that preceded the fast escalation into a relationship. The collection of previous encounters Hannibal classified as the colloquial term *a date* were a handful of banally sequenced, socially derived larks usually followed by sex or short-lived affairs.

This, however, was not banal.

He would savor this morning—what little there was left. He pushed his nose to the pillow, inhaling the musk of the bodies that occupied the bed, the pheromonal smell of sweat and oily skin, day-old cologne, and the remnants of floral and forested shampoo. The cotton duvet was draped across his shoulder, body sinking into the mattress below him, and as he shifted slightly, he felt the warm weight of Will's right arm limp across his waist. The younger man's face was buried between the bed and Hannibal's shoulder blade, his nose exhaling humid breath against the larger man's back.

This would be the third night in a row that Will slept in Hannibal's bed. It took three months —ninety-two brutal days to be exact—for Will to move from one end of the hall to the other.

The night they moved into the apartment, they shared a bed for the first time out of necessity, sleeping bare-chested under the ceiling fan, bodies sweaty from the heat, little more than a sheet covering their legs. That night, Will seemed incredibly intentional about his laying position, giving ample space between them, avoiding even the hint of contact, crossing his arms, and facing away. As the night deepened, however, that rigidity melted, and Hannibal never told Will that—several times—the young man's foot had slid up Hannibal's leg.

Hannibal had secretly hoped that night would be the first of many, that perhaps it would bring them closer, but that was not the case. They shared the apartment as roommates characteristically do.

The empty flat became a home fairly quickly. Over a three-day time span, the movers brought everything from the sublet, and the pre-ordered furniture arrived promptly. By the following weekend, Hannibal had arranged and decorated everything with his usual precision and flare.

When asked if he wanted help with his room, Will declined. He was very private about his space, always keeping the door shut whether he was in there or not. Hannibal had set foot in

there only once to help hang a mirror, and at that time, it was nothing more than a handful of half-unpacked boxes and an empty chest of drawers. Will spent quite a bit of time organizing and structuring his belongings which, to Hannibal, still seemed lackadaisical in nature. That was to say, what little of it he saw. Apart from the books the man continued to stack under the windows, despite having ample shelf space, Will's bedroom remained a mystery. It was his sanctuary, his place of safety, yet still, as the most recent days faded into night, Will left those confines to seek out the bed next to Hannibal.

The first night in the most recent series of three started randomly, without proposition or persuasion. Hannibal generally left his door open or, at the very least, cracked. There were enough metaphorical barriers between him and Will. He didn't need physical ones as well. It was a small gesture—intended to show Will that *his* space was *their* space—and oddly enough, it worked.

Under the glow of a full moon, Hannibal woke to find Will standing in the doorway, arms folded, leaning against the frame. He sat up to look at the man who was like a ghost—absent of himself. Hannibal said nothing, simply reached to the other side of the bed and drew back the duvet. Will climbed in without uttering a word, again laying cross-armed and facing away. Will often did that—saught comfort in silence—the shield that kept everyone out. But every now and then, Hannibal would witness the truest version of Will peaking through, like a whale breaching the water, an indication of the majestic beast below.

As Hannibal pulled the blankets over Will's shoulder, the younger man whispered, "*Thank you,"* and even though they were feint, the words were delicate and sincere.

There wasn't any explanation for Will coming to him, but Hannibal didn't need one. Even if it was timid and reserved, the organic desire to find safety in Hannibal sprouted from something true. Hannibal would protect Will, even from himself, no questions asked.

The second night was just as unexpected as the first. Hannibal surmised that a second night wouldn't happen without some type of coercion, so when Will said, *"I'm going to bed,"* Hannibal briefly considered drugging Will, tying him up, and throwing him in the bed to keep him there forever. Turns out he didn't have to.

When he went to the bedroom shortly thereafter, the unpredictable Will Graham was already in Hannibal's bed, still facing out, curled tight into himself. Hannibal smiled as he flicked off the light, undressing quickly and climbing in, forgoing all pre-bed necessity. As he sank in, Will asked Hannibal,

"Do you have another blanket?"

Hannibal, of course, had another blanket. Will knew that. It was at the foot of the bed. The intention of the ask was to admit, without saying so, that he was here by choice, and he was ok with that choice.

Do you have another blanket actually meant, *Last night, I <u>needed</u> a blanket. Tonight I <u>want</u> a blanket, and I am here to use yours.*

It was a confession of his feelings—the only way Will knew how. Hannibal pulled the white flocked throw over Will's shoulders. Then the young man rolled over, eyes still closed, and muttered quietly,

"You snore."

Hannibal smiled again, knowing that Will was expressing that he not only chose this but that he enjoyed it.

You keep me awake, and I still don't care. I like this too much to leave the room.

The third night, last night, was solidly more interesting than the other two. Alcohol was involved—the solvent that breaks down all semblance.

After their lovely night of dinner, music, and progressively uninhibited conversation topics, Will followed Hannibal into the bedroom, wobbly with an almost finished glass of wine in tow. There was a coquettish manner about him. It was as if he were subtly teasing Hannibal in an unspoken tempt.

Maybe I'll stay—maybe I won't. Maybe I'm here for you—maybe I'm just here to look at your books.

Much as he did in Hannibal's Baltimore office, Will enjoyed leaning on inanimate objects and touching anything he could get his hands on. He inspected Hannibal's small library, pulling books down and opening them momentarily, mimicking reading with feigned interest, then closing and returning them.

Hannibal watched from the bed, leaned back on the perch of his arm, a soft smile on his lips, unable to help how charming he found the whole scenario. While Will was distracted by his small performance under the guise of object inspection, Hannibal unlatched almost all of his shirt buttons, curious to see how Will's disposition would shift upon discovery. The result was profoundly more revealing than Hannibal had hoped.

When Will finally turned around, it was as if his eyes were already locked on the target, ready to look at Hannibal's chest innately, and when they witnessed the surprise of exposed skin, Will had stumbled over his words.

"I'm going to walk in here one day and find a self-help book like—um—like I um—forgot what—I was saying—"

Hannibal smiled salaciously as the younger man tried to recuperate from his blunder.

"—it was funny, though—rest assured."

"I'm always assured," Hannibal said, tipping back the rest of his wine and setting the empty glass on his side table.

Will drained his glass and placed it next to Hannibal's. He stiffened his body and took a hard fall to the bed below, groaning as he hit the comforting softness. When he rolled to face Hannibal, hand supporting his head, they settled into the stillness of the moment. Will's eyes

shifted around to—well—anywhere but Hannibal's affectionate yet penetrating gaze. It wasn't avoidance, though. Will had gentility and tenderness in his face like he was contemplating a loving thought or something that made him happy. He wanted to speak, say the heartfelt words dancing on his tongue. So, Hannibal waited for him, let him take his time.

Under the amber glow of the lamplight, there in the semi-dark room, Will let his fingertips play along the top of Hannibal's hand and whispered,

"I like your room."

Hannibal, in turn, collected Will's fingers as if they were valued and fragile objects and replied,

"You're welcome to stay with me."

Will stood up at that point, started walking around the room again. It was too much for him. Hannibal thought perhaps he had scared him off, but Will was out of things to look at, and when he realized it, he threw off his shirt and clumsily crawled into the bed, turning away and pulling the covers over his shoulder.

Hannibal knew that Will was cold-natured. He knew Will thought it was cold when the apartment was 72 degrees. He knew that without the flocked blanket, Will would wake in the night with a chill. He also knew that Will was too drunk to realize he hadn't pulled up the blanket from the foot of the bed. Hannibal considered all these things and decided to leave the blanket where it was, knowing Will would search for warmth one way or another.

As the night grew colder, Will shifted closer to Hannibal in short tosses and turns. His hands traveled over Hannibal's chest and neck several times, like the groping of a lover—wanting and confident. At one point, the rough fingers had delicately grabbed a handful of the older man's chest hair, and Hannibal allowed every second, not moving an inch until Will released.

It only took a subtle push to get Will to this point—more of a nudge than anything. Will was so hesitant, cautious to a fault, constantly worried about the frayed edge, refusing to tug at any thread lest the entire tapestry unravels. For so long, he avoided the things he wanted in a desperate attempt to negate what he deemed as *bad behavior*. But Hannibal was pushing, and Will was allowing it. This past month, Will had grown more comfortable with physical touch, moreover, initiating physical touch with Hannibal. Each day, and hence the past few nights, Will was crossing new boundaries, laying claim to new territory, and Hannibal was well aware that given enough time, sex was inevitable.

The last night in Wolf Trap was the only time the two men had ever gotten remotely close to physical intimacy. But that night was different, something Will liked to deem part of the past. He never spoke of it, never allowed Hannibal to speak of it, and often enough, Hannibal thought that Will pretended that it never happened at all. It had been the only reason that Will came with Hannibal—in the end—but the young man had buried it and refused to dig it up. Without it, opening Will up to himself was far more challenging.

But change was never immediate, even in the moments it seemed so. Revelation set in quickly, true enough, but the restructuring of habitual nature was always incremental. This

would take time.

Fortunately, time was a commodity that Will and Hannibal had in abundance.

Hannibal rested his arm over the younger man's, fingers brushing the coarse dark hair. Will stirred softly inside his sleep, shifting his body closer to Hannibal, tightening his arm, flattening torso to back, tucking knees to knees, crotch firmly planted against Hannibal's ass. He hadn't taken off his jeans, and Hannibal felt the button and zipper against his naked flesh, inhaling sharply when Will's morning wood rubbed against him. Hannibal closed his eyes again, clutching the man around him with fever and hesitation, so incredibly close to everything he had ever wanted.

Swayed by the onslaught of a nameless emotion, Hannibal slowly rolled his hips, dragging his ass firmly against the hot hardness below the sheath of denim. A short hum left Will's lips in a low rumble against Hannibal's shoulder, eliciting a second's hope in Hannibal's mind. The moment left as quickly as it arrived. Will sent his hand down and clutched his own shaft, adjusting himself, then flopped onto his back and drifted back into sleep.

Hannibal rolled over, perched on his elbow, witnessing the beauty before him.

It'd be so easy—he thought. So easy to touch him, run his hand across the scar, envelop the beautiful pink nipple with his lips, gently nibbling, press those same lips against the blush mouth surrounded in stubble. How red his face would become, grazing across the curved angles of that unshaven jaw.

Steady your hands before you begin

Hannibal had no intention of driving Will from his bed, so he refused the risk, denied the impulse, and pulled the white duvet up over Will's bare chest, softly flattening it, letting his thumb graze the pale skin. He climbed out of bed and went to shower.

2.

A hot shower was what he wanted, but a cold shower was most assuredly what he needed. Summer was still sticking to the city like honey on a drizzler, slowly falling away but never really leaving. The wind had returned, but it did nothing to abate the high temperatures, which had not fallen as promised. The heat applied itself in a paste, locking the sweet fever of flush and anticipation into Hannibal's body. At the moment, the only consultation to the swelter of the internal and external furnace was the cold water.

Hannibal turned the nozzle and stepped in immediately. The cascading stream from the overhead spout was like a waterfall, frigid yet refreshing, rinsing away the aches that still plagued his body. After wetting his hair and face, he moved to the showers inset, fingers walking through the small bundle of matte glass bottles and screw top dishes that lived there —the ingredients of a perfect grooming regimen.

The routine was one he had cultivated over the years, something he could surely perform blindfolded, yet lately, although he would never admit it to Will, he had exchanged a few of his standard formulas for things Will passingly mentioned he preferred.

He started with an organic biotin shampoo—lathering and rinsing his silver hair—and followed it with a conditioner that smelled of cherry blossom, cedarwood, and rosehip—a scent that Will always commented on.

"Wow—you smell really good." Will would always say, but only on the days that Hannibal used that particular cream.

After washing his face and exfoliating with charcoal and sea salt, he turned the faucet to hot—softening the hairs on his face—and used a razor against the grain for the closest and smoothest shave.

"I figure getting head from a guy is much nicer if he's smooth shaved—the face, I mean," Will said last night before quickly realizing what he was saying, neck painted in hives of splotchy blush, and coughed loudly before changing the subject.

Hannibal took the comment seriously—very seriously—especially with the added expression of fluster. He rinsed his hair, wringing the large gob of water still clinging to the locks, then shut off the shower. He patted his face dry and applied a calming aftershave, eye serum, and moisturizer to seal it all in.

The man was now prepared if Will should want some smooth head later.

He peered out the bathroom door to the bed, where the lumpy white bed began to rustle and undulate. Two arms shot up into the air before bending back down in a stretch. Will yawned, then coughed, then sat up. He tossed the blankets aside and rolled out, rubbing his eyes as he made his way to the bathroom, entering as if it were his own.

"Morning." He said, voice low and grating, his feet making slow shuffles over slate tiles.

"Good morning," Hannibal replied, folding his hand towel and returning it to the rung.

Will walked to the shower, flipped it on, then joined Hannibal at the mirror. Hannibal continued what he was doing with quiet elation, his face soft and pleased. Will leaned over the counter, staring into the glass, and inspected his specifically tightened brow.

"Hell—it doesn't get any smaller, does it?" He said, relaxing his face and leaning back to standing.

"Show me," Hannibal replied, turning to the younger man. He tenderly held Will's jaw, assessing the pink reflective scar on his forehead, all the implications the mark contained looking back at Hannibal like a mirror of its own.

The bone structure was still intact, a small wrinkle across the middle, but it hadn't affected Will's looks, not like Will thought it did.

"Still as handsome as ever," Hannibal said, releasing Will's face.

Will looked at him, maintaining eye contact as his lashes flickered softly. He unlatched his pants and dropped them without care to hide his mild erection, and Hannibal barely parted his lips—a reaction he could not help. Will walked to the shower, hand adjusting himself as he stepped into the stream.

Will had a beautiful body. Botticelli was known for the women he painted, but Hannibal was confident that if Botticelli had ever met Will Graham, his notoriety would have been vastly different, each masterpiece consisting of thick thighed men with slim torsos and sinewed shoulders.

Hannibal tried to put this out of his mind as he continued his routine, taking an absurdly excessive amount of time to brush his teeth and comb his hair.

Will rinsed away the tired crust from his eyes. He opened his mouth, let the hot water tickle his tongue and throat, then spat it all out. As he stood there, eyes closed, flashes from the dark started sending the voices and images of the night before. Suddenly struck by the things he had said, like highlighted passages in a book, he asked,

"Did I tell you that I'd wear a dress to our wedding if we ever got married?"

Hannibal smiled without turning around. "Your exact words were..."

"If we ever got married, I'd be the prettiest bride you ever fucking saw—you smug fuck."

"*Psh*." Will laughed through his pursed-lip into the stream of water. "Well, that's horrifying."

"Not at all. I quite agree."

Will didn't respond, but no unease accompanied the silence. The two men shared the calm, standing together with a tacit understanding that no pretense was needed, clinging to their thoughts and versions of the previous night, neither seeming to mind what came up.

As Hannibal applied lotion to his hands, he heard the glass bottles clink in the shower. Discreetly, he looked over his shoulder at the naked man behind the foggy glass, landing on the plump ass—completely by accident—then witnessed Will unscrewing the caps of the cleansers, shampoos, and moisturizers, every other bottle or so, closing his eyes as he inhaled.

Hannibal's cheek pinned itself into a half-smile, returning to his task so Will could continue whatever blissful thing was doing.

It was an odd sensation—having another man fumble through his personal belongings in reverence and appreciation. Will could see everything now. Not just behind the *person suit* but into the very fabric of his day-to-day life. The way Hannibal picked his teeth with his water flosser. How he would yawn with a soft noise. The way he trimmed his nose hair. All these things were displayed for Will's viewing pleasure. Will saw everything and accepted it as the way things were. It didn't even occur to Will to put up a judge or ask twice about who Hannibal was or the daily habits he had acquired.

Will let out an ungodly groan.

Shaken from his thoughts, Hannibal looked back once more to find Will hunkered over, letting the beating wet heat pulverize his back. Clearly, the young man was suffering the same post-wine pain Hannibal was.

"How are you feeling?" Hannibal asked.

"*Uggghhh,*" Will groaned again.

Hannibal smirked. "Shall I make us something to eat?"

"God, yes."

3.

The skillet crackled as Hannibal tossed tomatoes into the warm butter, sprinkling with white pepper and sweet basil. He turned the heat down, then shook the pan several times, stirring its contents.

Will always preferred simple breakfast—something with protein that was savory and paired well with black coffee. Frittatas were most often cooked, eggs sunny side up, scrambles with mild vegetables and plain toast. Hannibal baked the best sourdough, slicing the perfect thickness and toasting one side on the buttered skillet post-cooking, giving it additional flavor. Hannibal would smirk over his sips of coffee as he sometimes watched the young man devour three or four slices then ask for more before he had even finished the last bite.

Hannibal was more than delighted to oblige.

That particular morning, or rather, afternoon, Hannibal pulled the fresh bread from the oven just as Will walked in, still bare-chested, hair damp and fragrant, his light wash jeans riding low against his hips. One of the many pleasures of living with Will was watching the man as he graced the rooms and halls without a shirt.

"Sourdough?" Will asked as he began reaching into the cabinets for dishes.

"Yes."

"With sausage?" Will said eagerly, standing just beside Hannibal, unscrewing the top to the Moka percolator.

"Yes."

Sausage sliced thin on toast was Will's favorite. Hannibal was bringing the blissful night in bed out into the kitchen, hoping it would overflow.

These kitchen interludes had become a facet of Will and Hannibal's everyday life. They had perfected the art over the three months, and now the two worked together in unison—a choreographed dance. It was the same sequence, every day, whether Will slept in his own room or not, whether they woke mid-day or not. When they were in separate rooms, the stirring of one woke the other, even when they were next to silent. Hannibal was generally the first to wake, the first out into the kitchen, the first to start. Which worked out for the best.

Hannibal cooked, performing several different functions between the stovetop, the oven, and various other appliances. Will made the coffee and set the table, occasionally jumping in for auxiliary functions as sous-chef. Their bodies would work around each other with grace and ease, never bumping or tripping, almost clairvoyant to the other's intended steps. They never touched. They didn't have to. It was seamless.

However, much like the night before, that afternoon in the kitchen was vastly different from every other.

Hannibal worked meticulously at the stove, focused on the task at hand when suddenly, he felt Will's fingers rest gently on either side of his torso. They were soft, brushing like feathers, but intentional—purposeful. Hannibal stopped and turned his head slightly, peering over his shoulder to witness the young man behind him.

"*Excuse me,*" Will whispered, the warm breath grazing the larger man's ear, and politely shifted him to the side.

Hannibal couldn't help how his inhale hitched, his heart skipping a rapid beat. Will reached up into the cabinet, retrieving two cups and saucers, set the dishes down on the counter, then gently guided Hannibal back to the stovetop.

"*Thank you,*" He whispered again.

Those brushing flirtatious touches, the hints of first love pulsing inside fingertips. How fragile and fleeting—how irreplaceable and perfect.

Every day was an exploration of skin in small increments, a shoulder here, a hipbone there, the backs of their hands brushing together as they walked down the street. The coincidental nature of those touches, statically charged by something divine, made them impossible to capture or recreate. Hannibal could coerce Will—or anyone for that matter—but this was an experience he could not manufacture even under the most pristine conditions.

Hannibal had never been through this, coming undone by even the smallest—and most often accidental—tokens of affection. Perhaps other individuals could do this to him, make each touch feel like a spark, but he hadn't experienced it. Hannibal was not a stranger to the touch of men and women. He knew the gravity and weight of physical contact and how sensual it could be. The right people with the right caress could elicit such phantasmal beauty, this he knew. But what he felt as Will gently touched his hips to move him out of the way was something else entirely.

Will touched him, and when he pulled away, he took small chunks of flesh, revealing his skeleton until Hannibal was utterly bare. It was a slow reveal, a complete unveiling, something he was unable to stop, even if he wanted to.

To share personal space, private skin, inches that had only been explored by his own hands, eyes, and mouth. Those things, how precious and carnally linked to the interior of a human being, fell by the wayside only to let another person pick them up. How excruciatingly terrifying—the thought of your own flesh, your own identity, making space for someone else who could just as easily never return what was given.

Hannibal didn't take sugar in his coffee unless it was espresso or one of the other convoluted ways he made coffee. When it came from the Moka pot, he drank it black. Hannibal watched Will fill the cup, turn the handle parallel to the right elbow, and place it on the breakfast table. Will was learning everything about Hannibal and making it his personal duty to take up the tasks that constructed his personality.

What deep respect that was, to look after the quirks and eccentricities of another human, ensuring they stay intact to construct the human you care for. There would always be irritating things, but all of these were the make-up of an individual, and Will wanted to guard it all. It made Hannibal's heart swell, the seemingly small gesture feeling so much like one of adoration and love.

Will went to sit down, waiting for Hannibal to finish cooking, but quickly popped back up, his bare back touching the cold wooden chair.

"I'm gonna borrow a sweater," He said, exiting the kitchen and returning, pulling a cream cashmere v-neck over his head.

He was wearing Hannibal's clothes now. Hannibal sang with silent pride, finding Will ten times more attractive inside this new, slightly oversize, shell.

"This is *soft*," Will said, making announcements of sensation as if they were small miracles. He came up behind Hannibal with a playful smile and rubbed his front against Hannibal's back.

Hannibal, obviously, already knew the sweater was soft. It was his sweater. But he wasn't about to stop the muscular young man from rubbing anything against him. As Will went and sat back down, Hannibal followed, setting his plate of tomato and sausage-laden bread, then taking his flat hand and drawing it up Will's belly, up his chest, resting on his shoulder.

"*Very soft*." He whispered into Will's ear.

Will didn't lean away. He simply picked up his coffee and took a sip, smiling slightly as he swallowed the hot dark liquid.

"Did I kick you last night—in my sleep?" Will asked.

"You roused in your sleep," Hannibal replied, flattening a napkin onto his lap, "but I remain unscathed." He finished with a reassuring smile.

Hannibal had known for a long time that Will often had dreams, night terrors, episodes of sleepwalking. Those things had been described in therapy before, when their relationship was strictly that—Doctor and Patient. However, it was much different to witness something in practice rather than theory. On a handful of occasions, Will had woken Hannibal, the talking and moaning heard echoing all the way down the hall. One time he tried to open the front door in his sleep, fumbling with the handle for nearly five minutes.

The two previous nights Will had stayed in bed next to Hannibal, he had thrashed quite violently on more than one occasion. When that happened, Hannibal would try to calm him with soothing strokes through his hair or whisper comforting words to wake him. It was something Hannibal tried to avoid, however. He had tempted this the first night, and when Will fully woke, it was as if some terrible lightning had struck, bringing him into an altogether different state, and left Hannibal's bed, returning to his own room without a word.

The morning after such dark interludes, when Hannibal would ask him about it, Will would always say the same thing: *I don't remember*. Then he would grab his pack of cigarettes and step out onto the fire escape, ignoring himself more than he was ignoring Hannibal. But today, Will seemed willing to speak of it with normalcy, and Hannibal would take care of this personality quirk, just as Will did with his coffee.

"Did I walk around?"

"No. You remained in the bed the entire night."

Will put the brim of his coffee cup to his lips and swallowed over a large bite of toast. It was clear he was considering the implications of that.

"I don't remember my dreams," he said, "sometimes I think I remember. Sometimes I have a dream, a nightmare or something, and I wake up, and I think, *I know what happened, I know what's wrong* then it just disappears."

"You woke last night?"

"Briefly."

"You didn't leave the room."

Again, Will considered the thought then let the following words fall from his mouth.

"I like your room."

Hannibal learned to listen when Will made no sound, to speak without words. He learned to read Will's thoughts like reading lips, the things he said without uttering a word. Hannibal entertained the idea that it was a mutual exchange, an unspoken understanding, that they communicated this way—and in a sense—were open and honest with each other. Hannibal knew then that Will wanted these nights to continue, at this pace, without a fuss being made. Hearing it, Hannibal could do nothing more than grant his wish.

"You are always welcome to stay with me."

Will said nothing in return, looking out through the casement windows beside the breakfast nook. Hannibal figured at that moment the young man would stand to go out for a smoke, but he didn't. He stayed.

"Thank you." He muttered, eyes gazing into the summer city.

These things—these small, simple things—were what Hannibal noticed. The shifts that happened like a change in the wind, something most people would never realize happened at all.

4.

Steady your hands before you begin

He had not thought about those words in many years—not since he retired his surgical career to take up psychiatry. During his residency at Johns Hopkins, his attending physician, Dr. Philip J. Harken, had lectured a group of green trainees, Hannibal among them, on his personal pre-op ritual, something he suggested all new residents develop.

Both comically ironic and stoutly serious, *Steady Your Hands Before You Begin* was the final step in the preparation process. Of course, all surgeons required a steady hand before sinking a scalpel into live human flesh, but that was not the intention of the phrase. The six words were meant to open a moment of intrinsic reflection—a time to collect yourself before the surgery commenced. It was nothing more than an inhale, but Hannibal could recall how it always stopped his heart. Inside the skipped beat, all internal noise was silenced, and he could connect his focused, logical mind to the actions of each hand. Then, with clear intention, the cutting edge of his scalpel would open the pink flesh, exposing the life inside, and the process of internal change would begin.

Steady your hands before you begin

He hadn't thought of his residency nor Dr. Harken in years. Yet, the words of wisdom continued to repeat themselves, suspended without strings over Hannibal every time he used a cutting edge to withdraw life instead of deposit it. With no kill in his immediate past or future, it was a rather enigmatic manifestation, as if the words were being read to him—a dream whispered from the apartment walls.

"I better get moving," Will said, bringing Hannibal out of his memories. He watched Will finish the last bite of toast and wipe his mouth.

"Where are you off too?" He asked, slightly surprised at the announcement.

"The shop."

"You have work today?" Hannibal asked with curiosity that didn't fully mask his disappointment. Will did not routinely work on Saturday.

"They're coming to get the motor on Monday," Will said as he stood up, collecting his dishes and taking them to the sink. "I should finish today. Less to worry about tomorrow."

"Do you need a lunch?"

"It'll only take a few hours," Will offered, drying his damp fingers on his jeans as he returned to the table. "Thank you for breakfast," He said placing a hand on Hannibal's shoulder as he swallowed his last sip of coffee.

For a moment, lost inside the haze of afternoon joy, Will forgot himself. He returned his cup to its saucer and, without thinking, leaned into Hannibal, as if he were about to offer a kiss goodbye.

They both stopped suddenly, the world on pause, their faces only inches apart. They looked at each other, trepidation shared through the gaze, and in an instant, Hannibal watched Will retreat far behind his ethereal blue eyes. The young man blinked away, retracting his face quickly, and standing back up. He gave Hannibal's shoulder two hard pats and walked out of the room.

Hannibal listened as Will's bedroom door opened then quickly shut. He took a long, exasperated blink, then rested his elbows on the table, interlacing his fingers, thumb brushing his smooth chin as he inhaled to slow his thumping heart.

The unpredictable Will Graham.

Hannibal gently encouraged mutual trust one touch at a time, hoping that the young man would someday expose his vulnerable underbelly and allow Hannibal to take up space in his most tender parts, but each time they achieved something meaningful or intimate, Will would quickly retract into his shell. He would find something else to focus on, some other place to go, retreat into his room in a state of panic.

Hannibal could not, for the life of him, understand this man in his entirety.

Of course, Hannibal could have just as easily leaned in, initiated the kiss with enthusiasm, reassuring Will that the feeling was indeed mutual. Instead, he hesitated, and his hesitation had been just as veritable as Will's hesitation. It was innate, unintentional, and in no way reflected his very obvious desire to have Will's mouth pressed against his. It was typical of Will to contradict himself—his thoughts and actions continuously opposed—but not for Hannibal.

Why did he hesitate?

Each day, he found it harder to ignore the overwhelming sensation that Will was the only family he would ever know. He could no longer imagine a future where Will was not part of his life. His love for the man down the hall had grown far beyond his ability to reasonably control. Yet, their relationship was not something Hannibal was inclined to force.

Everything between them thus far had been steady—mundane and tedious—but steady all the same. No passion existed, but neither did tragedy. Hannibal was explicitly aware of the

irreparable harm he had caused in the past, the glaring fractures reflecting back at him—the scars that would never diminish. He knew the fragility of his relationship with Will and how easily it could break. If he were to initiate anything too soon, Hannibal could not rationally posit the outcome. He did not know what actions would be met with rejection, and that was a risk he was unwilling to take.

The only way to be certain of anything was to wait for Will to move first, wait for him to come to Hannibal of his own volition, no matter how long it took.

Will was sitting on the cusp of change, his pink flesh sliced open by Hannibal's cutting edge, exposing the life inside him. Even the slightest mistake would be the end of them both. Hannibal knew that if he were to foster this process, witness the evolution of Will Graham with surgical precision, his thoughts and actions would have to align, his logic controlling the movement of each hand. So he found that space, the fluid darkness that pulled like quicksand and let it consume him.

The front doorknob clicked loudly and broke the silence, and Hannibal didn't have to guess. He knew that Will had slipped through it without saying goodbye. Hannibal was Will's prisoner, chained to their shared life, awaiting his fate inside the cell walls of that apartment.

SPLIT HABITAT

Chapter Notes

1. Inspired by another amazing B. Fuller show, I've decided Lee Pace will play the role of Cooper Kennedy.

2. Beverley Katz is reincarnated as a welder in a shipyard ❤️

3. This chapter takes place immediately following the events of the last chapter.

1.

Beverly Katz later told her girlfriend Solene that she should have known something was wrong. She should have known it, she would say, because Will never arrived late to work. He always showed up on time, even when it was just under the wire. And then there had been his attire, the floral perfume, and the overall dazed expression.

Solene would later reassure her, saying, "*How could you know something like that*," but Beverly knew. She would look back as far as that first summer—that one particular Saturday—as the first indication of trouble. That had been the day they stopped at the flower shop. The one seemingly innocent stop that changed everything.

Beverly and Will had been very close friends, a relationship that lasted more than two years. Over that time, she came to believe she knew Will.

How wrong she had been.

There had probably been more Beverly could have done for Will over the course of their friendship—countless missed opportunities. She thought back through those years more often than she liked to admit, searching for what she missed, thinking that if she found the root cause, somehow that would help things.

It never did.

She could not go back to that day, could not undo her advice, could not prevent the encounter at the flower shop. The truth was, though, even if she had known—seen the signs and acted on them—Beverly Katz was no match for the forces at work in Will Graham's life.

His fate had always been out of her hands.

Three of his fingers formed a point like holding a pencil, and Will's shirt wrinkled slightly as he scratched his sternum in tiny movements. The skin underneath itched and burned, pulsing lightly after he stopped. It was probably rubbed raw by now. Less than a half-inch across, the abrasion hurt to the touch, but that didn't stop Will's hand from involuntarily scratching it all the time. Maybe it would bleed one day. Who knew. But the fact remained that it continued to itch no matter how much it hurt.

You should have kissed him

Will walked to the shipyard that day. It was about a half-hour trek on foot with only two turns toward the end, like one long concrete hallway. Since the navigation took very little cognition to accomplish, Will quickly faded from specific focus into a muffled vacuum of empty thought.

He didn't usually work Saturdays, so there wasn't any set schedule, but he had agreed to meet Beverly at 10:00 AM to finish a custom motor job due to West Marina by Monday. Will checked his watch—almost 2:00 PM. He would have some explaining to do.

Bev would undoubtedly have a barrel full of questions locked and loaded, ready for when he arrived on the shop floor. They were always light-hearted questions, driven by actual interest and concern, but they never waited for the starting gun. They ran ahead of all other conversations, far too eager for patience. He couldn't blame her, though. He was late. Really late. And that type of unusual behavior always brought out the investigator in Beverly Katz.

He looked down at his body as he continued his steady pace across Kent Street, running a hand over his jaw in a feeble inspection. He was a bit scraggly, old t-shirt and tattered jeans, an overgrown beard, and bloodshot eyes—at least that's what Will assumed since they felt like they had been sprinkled with fiberglass.

He hadn't considered putting more thought into his appearance. That morning/afternoon had been a disaster. In the heat of the moment, he ran from the kitchen into the bedroom, throwing on the first thing he saw, then bolted out the door without saying a word. Will had a long night/morning/afternoon—and it showed.

He knew the Q & A waiting for him, and honestly, he was slightly excited to tell Beverly everything.

He took a right onto Bedford Ave, then a right onto Flushing, and after about a minute of walking, Will could hear the approaching noises of the shipyard. The blaring boat horns, dinging buoys, and occasional seagull squall intertwined, each sound taking center stage then fading to the background as another took its place. The air was seasoned with the briny smell of salt from the bay, not overpowering but noticeable. It wasn't a pleasant smell, more like musty garbage mixed with sweet heat, but a feeling lived inside it, a sensation of nostalgic ease.

This was Will's favorite place in the city.

Levy & Akers Shipyard was nestled inside the old Brooklyn Naval Yard complex just east of Dumbo. The 19th-century industrial port contained dozens of red brick buildings with coal-stained smokestacks and green glass windows, neatly hugging the shimmering slate blue bay. The enormous graving Dry Docks once oversaw the construction and maintenance of military vessels. Now largely retained as historical property, half the Naval facilities were shut down, and Akers utilized the remaining warehouses for barge, ferry, and ship repairs.

Three months ago, Will inquired about a mechanic position at Levy & Akers and was given the job almost immediately. His past experience was probably to thank for that. The shipyard culture was one Will found familiar, and he slipped into his new position with ease, needing very little assistance or training.

Over the brief period he worked in the Engine and Machine Shop, he had gained a reputation for his precise and efficient work. This hadn't gone over well with everyone, and some coworkers—who both admired and resented his performance—subtly implied that Will wasn't at Akers for the career prospects. Rumor had it that he kept his head down and worked hard to avoid The Alphabet Boys. They weren't wrong, but Will would act like they were, always feigning objection and offense for good measure.

Everyone there called him Doc. A joke Will was sure—in some circles—passed for wit.

He earned the nickname partly on account that his desk always looked sterile—immaculate. When he would prep for a repair job, it looked like he was prepping for surgery—several cobalt blue shop towels draped across his workbench, tools categorically laid out in a neat line. As he worked between motor and workbench, all mistakes were retained in the fibrous precautions, leaving the surrounding surfaces unstained. At the end of the day, his workstation was spotless. It was a manufacturing warehouse. Everyone had dust or metal filings or specks of grease across their workbenches.

Not Will.

After an eight-hour shift, the dirtiest things in Will's workspace were his hands. That's how he worked. He quietly and effortlessly fixed broken motor after broken motor and kept to himself most of—well—all of the time.

Dry Dock 5 was just outside the Engine and Machine Shop warehouse, and the large caisson door that sealed the dock from the East River was very rarely used. The concrete walkway across the top, lined with a yellow chain railing, had a somewhat pleasant view.

After about a week of watching Will sit out there alone, eating what looked like a lunch made by his mother, Beverly Katz finally made her move in friendship. She climbed up there and plopped down next to him.

"You want some tea?" She asked, unscrewing the top of her metal Stanley thermos.

Will picked up his—definitely too lavish and expensive to be a Stanley—thermos and shook it slightly. "Coffee." He said.

“Well, don’t be stingy,” Beverly retorted, taking her lid and jutting in front of Will, “*share.*”

He smiled at her, chewing his food and pouring the black liquid into her green mug. And it really wasn’t a wonder he was being stingy. It was some of the best coffee Beverly had ever swallowed.

From then on, they ate lunch together, looking out over the East River, sharing coffee, and talking.

Beverly thought Will was an interesting guy. He said he lived in Williamsburg, in an apartment she was sure she couldn’t afford in two lifetimes, with his roommate—what was his name? She always forgot. It was strange, though. Medieval sounding. Will didn’t say much about him, only that they moved to New York together from somewhere further south, looking to start a new life. So, they had a history, that much Beverly could deduce, but Will didn’t go into any further detail, and Beverly didn’t ask. People come and go. Same story ten billion different ways.

Will didn’t have family, and from what she witnessed, he didn’t have very many friends.

“You got a girlfriend?” Beverly asked one day, feeling they had gotten far enough into their conversations to start broaching more personal topics.

“No,” He replied quietly.

“A boyfriend?”

He politely shook his head, staying dead silent.

“You’re figuring some stuff out—aren’t you, Will?” She said, tenderly nudging him with her elbow.

“You could say that,” He replied with a reserved smile.

Beverly asked these questions because she actually cared, even when she sounded rhetorical or sarcastic, and Will understood that. She knew he was figuring things out. I recognized the struggle, she would say. Will Graham had put on an act for the world his entire life, and it probably convinced most people. But Beverly knew he was gay. He didn’t hide it as well as he thought he did—the familiar disposition of someone ready to burst at the seams from the pressure of a suppressed life.

Will passed under the rusted iron sign Levy & Akers Co. then headed to the right, directly toward the Engine and Machine Shop. It was a large aluminum warehouse with opaque white windows crowing the walls, eight docking bays, and coated concrete floors. Over the past few months, the heatwave turned the metal-encased workshop into a frying pan, one with the lid on so it was hot and muggy, roasting and boiling.

He reached his workstation, Engine Bay 04, already wiping trickling sweat from the side of his face. The foggy lull of his mind was brought to sharp focus when he heard Beverly’s voice.

“Doc!” She beckoned, yelling over the whining sounds of a bolt riveter. Will looked across the welding bay to find Beverly lifting her welding mask, revealing a wide and knowing smile, wisps of onyx hair sticking to her damp neck. He nodded, returning the smile, and she quickly removed her helmet and gloves, dropping them away as she headed over.

“Hey Doc,” She said as she hopped onto the industrial table used for motor blocks, her feet dangling off the ledge.

“Hey,” Will replied with a slight smile, a grating tone to his voice, plopping his bag onto his desk.

“Late night?” She asked with that charismatic half-smile, sliding her coveralls off her shoulders and tying the arms around her waist, her boney shoulders glistening in sweat.

“Late start,” Will replied, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

“A *late start* because of a *late night*?” She raised a sly eyebrow high as she leaned back into her hands.

“What do you think?” Will smirked in a playful jab, infected by her giddiness.

Even as she sat on the table relatively relaxed, her legs swung slowly back and forth like a dog unable to contain its wagging tail. Beverly liked Will. She liked hearing about his life. Of course, she was no stranger to the intoxicating effects of gossip, but she wasn’t looking for the drama. Her actual interest was in her friends’ lives. She loved hearing about the happy, wild, or difficult things they were going through.

Since Will seemed to have very few pleasures in his life, even the tiniest hint of his potential happiness brought her joy. Often enough, she would seem more excited by Will’s stories than Will was. It made him feel worthy, like his words had value, like his small life had meaning.

And to Beverly, that was all true. Will would talk, and Beverly hung on every word, reacting with honesty and unmasked emotion. That type of validation could not be manufactured.

Her deep umber eyes almost always looked black, like two large solids pupils in the center of delicate eyes, partly hidden beneath her long eyelashes. For as dark as they were, they were also warm and inviting, glinting with a flicker of mischief. At least, that’s how they looked as Beverly sat on Will’s work table waiting for the full scoop.

“*So*, are you gonna tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Will replied, playing dumb as he prepped his workbench.

“About your date last night,” She said impatiently, legs increasing their swinging speed.

Will scoffed as he pulled his coveralls down from the hook and slipped them on. “It is *definitely* not what you think.” He said, the zipper making a dull squealing rip as it ascended his body.

Beverly blew an unconvinced laugh through her slightly pursed lips.

"*Please*. You look like a strung-out raver, and you smell like a Bath and Body Works. Not what *I* think? It's probably not what *you* think."

Will had forgotten about using Hannibal's soap earlier. He brought his nose down to his shoulder and sniffed. Man—he really did smell like flowers—like Hannibal flowers. Like Hannibal laying naked in a bed of flowers.

Fuck.

That brought back a flood of thoughts he had been trying to avoid all day. The steady waters he'd been sailing through, blissful in his sightless fog, suddenly became choppy. He wanted to find humor in Beverly's loving interrogation, but the fun was fading fast.

On his walk to work, Will was resolved that he would tell Beverly everything. He would detail the events of last night, how he had spent the past three nights in Hannibal's bed and how they had been acting toward each other for weeks, then get her sound advice on how to proceed. However, he suddenly panicked as he relived his horrific kitchen blunder.

You should have kissed him.

He turned to his workbench and began pulling out the painted iron drawers, removing items one at a time. When Beverly hopped off the table and came to lean beside him, Will tried to smile, but it was a poor effort. The insecurity that suddenly plastered his face dimmed Beverly's jovial shine. He peered over at her, avoiding eye contact by searching her face for a safe place to land. Her right cheek was in clear view, and he landed on the large scar that lived there like a crater in her silky limestone skin.

Life had made its mark on Beverly, just as it had on Will. He didn't know her history, just as she didn't know his. But they both had wounds that—while they no longer hurt—would never entirely heal. It gave her enough insight to know when something was cutting far below the superficial surface.

"What happened, Will?" She asked, nudging him gently with her elbow to try and collect his eye contact.

"Nothing happened," He replied, and the words may have sounded like a brush-off, but they were actually pretty accurate.

Beverly wasn't entirely pleased with the response, but she allowed it. She knew when to drop the subject, and she never forced anything but always made it clear that she knew something was wrong and that she was there if/when Will needed her.

"Your *nothing* is always *something*," She said, patting his back and returning to the welding bay.

Bev was right, of course. His nothings were always somethings.

There was no accusation or judgment. It was just—accurate. For some reason, Will thought of his lonely life back in Wolf Trap, where the entire world misunderstood him, and for a

second, he was grateful to have Beverly as a friend.

3.

Will told Hannibal that it would only be a few hours, which was a lie.

He had managed to stretch a two-hour project into an eight-hour workday. After finishing the motor for Monday, he commenced doing checks and double-checks and triple checks, sweeping and cleaning out all of Bay 04, and taking enough smoking breaks to grow a small tumor. He helped Beverly finish several of her back-logged projects, then took it upon himself to clean out the entire Welding Bay 02.

He knew he was stalling his return home. He knew, and he continued to avoid it. He didn't want to go back to the apartment, and any menial task was a barrier between him and the end of the day. While it was an excellent time-waster, this mundane busy-work was also a straightforward, uncomplicated way to fill his headspace so that no other thought could nudge its way in. As long as he kept working, he would stay safe, and in that way, the shipyard became a refuge.

There was a period—or at least he felt there was—where the Levy & Akers Shipyard became more real to him than his everyday life. When life turned sour and his mind filled with unwanted thoughts, Will would think about the things he had left to do on a project, the tools he would use, and ways he might try and restore an old engine to new. In that way, it became a fantasy world to him, a daydream of controllable factors.

Sometimes that was easier than facing the truth. Sometimes all Will needed was easy.

The difference between the Shipyard and the Apartment felt to Will like the difference between his bedroom and Hannibal's bedroom—a long hallway apart.

In his room, he spent so much time arranging and organizing everything in a way that he could easily retrieve them and easily return them, closing the door behind him when he left—no one in or out.

They called him '*Doc*' at the shipyard because he was surgical in how he conducted his work and, moreover, how he conducted his life. The nuts and bolts were the fasteners that kept everything screwed on tight. He compartmentalized everything in his workspace because he was unable to do so in his own life. How many cobalt blue shop towels had he placed around himself, terrified that something would spill over to stain the surrounding spaces?

What was it about a messy life that terrified Will?

The apartment building on Berry Street was the complete opposite of Levy & Akers. There were things there that could not be fastened down or fixed. The corner of red wallpaper would peel up no matter how much it made Will itch. The squeaky elevator would rattle,

holding his fate in its small 4x4 box until it ultimately decided to release him. And there, at the end of the hall, Hannibal's bedroom sat—door always open—beckoning Will to leave the confines of his structured safe haven and enter a space where chaotic impulses grew rampant.

Will simultaneously felt he belonged to both, yet no matter how hard he fought, at the end of the day, he found himself leaving one to enter the other.

Resentment built up as he thought about how Hannibal continued to keep that door open, knowing how it tempted, putting these situations right in front of Will like cheese in a mousetrap. Hannibal was making Will face himself—forcing him to confront the things he would rather ignore. It was as if Hannibal's voice was on a continual loop in his head, asking —

Isn't this what you want?

—and quite frankly, Will didn't want to process those things all the time. Sometimes he just wanted to sweep a shop floor, screw in some bolts, shut off his brain, and not think—blow off some steam.

And *fucking christ* if he didn't need to blow something.

Will stopped counting the amount of time he had gone without sex. Sometimes—like that morning when he woke in the bed next to Hannibal with a throbbing hard-on—it felt like it had been years. He would sincerely like to fuck someone—soon—without the song and dance of *Do I like you or do you like me* and without the aftermath of *what does this mean?*

Will thought for a moment about what it might be like to have a man inside him, and he shut his eyes for a second as levity floated through his lower back and groin. Part of him wanted to walk through the memories of last night, living amongst the fantasy, then the other part wanted to scream loudly every time his mind brought it up.

"You've gotta stop," Beverly said with heavy exasperation.

"What?" Will asked, confusion twisting his face.

"The random whistling, Will—finish the melody or stop."

Will hadn't even noticed until she said something, but every time an unsavory thought cropped up, Will would whistle a loud, repetitive tune to drown it out.

"Sorry," He said, quietly returning to his sweeping.

"You ready to talk about it?" Beverly asked, watching Will fight off the urge to whistle again, knowing how he was distracting himself with songs, work, and flat-out avoidance.

"There's really nothing to talk about."

Beverly was a welder by trade. She knew a fire when she saw one, and Will's pants were ablaze. She was confident that if he had a date last night, he would have at least said so, so

she started searching for alternative causes to Will's altered mood.

"Is it your roommate—what's his name?"

Will felt the familiar weight of dread settle at the bottom of his chest—really unable to talk about it inside his inner dialogue, let alone with someone out loud. But Beverly didn't know that would be the trigger. Her intentions were pure.

"*Hannibal.*"

"Hannibal—right." She said with a head nod, burning the name into her memory. "Did something happen with him?"

Will said nothing in return, and Beverly knew that silence was a yes.

"What did he do?" Her voice was becoming more casual, less probing, actually now worried about this guy Will had only ever mentioned in passing.

"We—just had a disagreement earlier."

"Like a fight or a conversation?"

"Neither."

"Neither?" She asked inquisitively, the mystery continuing even with answers. "Is he one of those crazy passive-aggressive types?"

To say the least.

"We're just two very different people," Will said.

"And you shared the apartment—what—three months now?"

"Yes."

"That's still early, Will. Maybe you two haven't found your groove yet."

"I think we found our groove, and that's the problem."

"What's that mean? Is he not giving you your space?"

"I might not be giving him his space—and then the space itself is—" Will said, his eyes and voice trailing off.

"What about it?" Beverly asked, eyebrows furrowed.

"There's something vaguely discomforting about it."

"Is that what all this busywork has been about today? You don't want to go home?"

Will nodded timidly.

"*Will*," Beverly said, leaning against her desk and folding her arms. "Spaces are just spaces—it's the people occupying the space who can turn homes into hellscapes. If you're afraid to go home, you're afraid of—"

"Seeing him—yeah, I know," Will said, cutting her off and wiping his face in frustration. He sighed hard, then peered over at her, apologizing for the outburst.

Beverly only smiled, asserting that no apology was needed. She kicked her foot out and tapped Will's shin, and he finally met her eyes in earnest.

"Don't let him get in your head like that." She said, and Will thought only Beverly Katz could make a blunt phrase sound that gentle.

"I'm not letting him do anything," Will replied with all the honesty he could muster, which wasn't much.

"Maybe you should just avoid him—for a while—if you're rubbing each other the wrong way."

It was solid advice, for you know, the average human being, but Will knew that he would rub against Hannibal even without physical contact. They could be on opposite sides of the apartment, and he would feel like they were pressed tightly together, the friction stinging like a rug burn. Will put his fingers to his sternum and scratched.

"Maybe." He said plainly.

"Do you want me to stay with you? Give you a buffer for the night?"

"I appreciate it, but that might make things worse."

"Just tell him I had a fight with my girlfriend and needed a place to crash for the night." She said with a shrug. "He can't argue that, right?"

Will suppressed a big blurting laugh. If given the opportunity, Hannibal Lecter would argue with a wet ball of lint.

"What about Sol?" Will asked.

"I'll give her a call. It'll be fine."

Will actually liked that idea—someone to serve as a distraction—but also someone to keep him company as he went about the difficult task of breaking his new sleep pattern. If he were honest with himself at that moment, he would have admitted that even in light of their recent somewhat confusing kitchen encounter, he wanted to sleep next to Hannibal. The thoughts previously locked away inside the file cabinet, What The Fuck Was That: Do Not Open, were now jumping straight to action, bypassing impulse entirely. Right now, he just needed a friend.

Will knew Beverly was smart enough to navigate her way around Hannibal's conversation. However, he didn't know if she could navigate every other facet of Hannibal's personality.

Not many people had. Will liked Beverly. He did not want Beverly to end up dead. But he would allow this, if only to see how it would play out, unable to admit that he was tempted by the allure of playing with Hannibal emotionally.

“Well—you want to head out soon?” Beverly said, standing from her stool and collecting her things.

“Yeah.”

“You want to stop by Coaster’s?”

“Sure.”

Will slung his messenger back around his body and flicked off his desk light. Beverly hugged his arm tight, letting him lead the way out, as he always did because Beverly’s love language was affection, and she always told Will it was his too, but he had been neglected so long that he thought his love language was nervous tremors.

“We need to get you a man, Will. Someone for you to love.” Beverly said, matching Will’s strides. “I think that’s the itch you’ve been trying to scratch.”

Little did she know what awaited them outside a flower shop just around the block.

4.

Coaster’s was a small cobblestone area outside the Naval Yard that housed a small handful of cafes, arts and crafts stores, greengrocers, gourmet food and wine, and flower shops. It was small but usually bustling in the evening, filled to the brim with workers on their way home. Beverly and Will always—at the very least—walked through. They usually had one or two things to pick up, but even when they didn’t, Will walked through the market, an intuitive eye peeled for something Hannibal might like. Once, it had been a bagful of perfectly ripe Valencia oranges. Another, it had been a small pouch of black truffle salt. Yesterday, it was several bottles of Gaja wine, which he knew was not well thought out but figured that Hannibal would like the sentiment all the same. However, this evening, Will was browsing outside the flower shop, lingering, hands in pockets, around the vivid bundles of violets and snapdragons.

The thought surfaced again—

You should have kissed him.

—and as it came, Will didn’t immediately file it away.

He looked down at the flowers and thought about how maybe they would serve as the usher for another opportunity. If they did, he wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. He’d lean in with full force.

Then again, was it strange to bring home flowers? They weren't dating. They hadn't slept together. Hannibal would appreciate it—right? Or would he politely put them in a vase, secretly resenting the appeals to his vanity? Or would he clearly state that he saw the ruse and found it insulting? What if he turned smug, started expecting too much, and pushed too fast? What if they were flowers to Will but a grand romantic gesture to Hannibal? What then? Would this advance things or make them worse?

Will couldn't think clearly enough to decide, so he started to walk away.

"Snapdragons tend to be the better choice."

Will's head swiveled backward to a man standing across the flower stand, a brown paper bag tucked under his arm, wearing a bold print silk short-sleeve button-up, lackadaisically tucked into high ankle slacks and a pair of chestnut brown loafers without socks.

"Excuse me?" Will said, turning his body to face the guy.

"Snapdragons," He replied, taking a step closer, pointing down at the peach and yellow flowers. "In my experience, they always get a good reaction—not that I have much experience, I guess," he said, chuckling to himself and running a hand through his swept-back hair.

Will said nothing—at all—only breathed with a slightly twisted brow. What was he supposed to say? Thank you? This man clearly wasn't the florist. If Will didn't know any better—which he didn't—he would have thought that this guy was coming onto him. The only reason he knew that was because he had wasted his breath on far worse pickup lines. So, Will continued to say nothing—his only defense.

However, Beverly was not about to watch this opportunity slip past. She had been quietly observing the interaction, and even for a guy, this tall drink of water was little more than the dream candidate, now in the running for Will's next boyfriend. Beverly stepped behind Will and shoved him hard in the back with her shoulder, sending him a step closer to the guy.

"Uh—" Will coughed, "—always?"

Beverly squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Good one, Will. Keep that up.

"Yeah—always. Watch—" The man picked one stalk of bell-shaped blossoms out of the plastic white bin and extended it to Will. Will took it, an involuntary smile rising like a beam across his face. "—see? Good reaction." The man finished.

"I see your point." Will laughed, actually quite charmed.

"Thought you might." The man said with a wide smile, offering his hand. Will shook it.

"Cooper Kennedy."

Cooper Fucking Kennedy. Honestly, Will had no idea how to perceive this guy whose name sounded like a politician with a dark secret and whose appearance resembled a Herculean Flower Child fresh from vacation in St. Barts.

“Will Graham.”

The top of Will’s head could easily tuck under Mr. Kennedy’s chin. That’s how tall the guy was. He had ash brown hair with flecks of gold and grey, long and swept back, the ends hitting his collar. Stubble covered his angular jaw and cleft chin, and Will couldn’t tell if the man hadn’t shaved for a few days or if that was his five o’clock shadow, the hairs bursting forth from the overload of testosterone fertilizer.

“It’s a pleasure, Will Graham.”

Clearly, Mr. Kennedy had some type of workout regimen he steadfastly adhered to. Slaying dragons, climbing Everest, or saving a bus full of children from an oncoming train—Will imagined. The tanned musculature was lean yet stout and undulated even under the slightest movements. Men like Mr. Kennedy weren’t supposed to exist. It made life much harder on guys like Will. Mr. Kennedy had every unfair advantage in the book, probably after a long growing period inside whatever government incubation laboratory he was spawned in.

Will could not believe the thoughts popping up in his head like wack-a-moles. The rate they exploded inside his head was vastly unfair, and Will could not store them all away properly. So he let one fly without restraint.

You should let him take you wherever he wants to go.

Will cleared his throat loudly. “Uh—this is my friend, Beverly.” He offered, trying to be polite, but all she did was flutter her fingers and walk off.

“Nice to meet you!” Mr. Kennedy called after her, a jovial smile still on his face. “She’s your girlfriend?”

“No, no,” Will laughed. “Just a coworker.”

“*Good,*” Cooper said, eyes riding the length of Will’s body.

Will had literally never been on the receiving end of such blatantly typical advances. And cliché or not, Will found himself amused.

What would Hannibal say?

An interesting thought. What would Hannibal say, indeed? There was only one way to find out.

“So, who are you buying flowers for tonight?” Will asked, taking a small step closer.

“Me? No one—I came over here to use that pickup line on you.”

This wasn’t Mr. Kennedy’s first rodeo.

“I’m sure,” Will said smugly.

Mr. Kennedy seemed to find that both amusing and charming.

“I’ll buy the lot and give ’em to you if it means proving my point.” He said, pointing to the entire display and taking another step toward Will.

“How would *wasting your money* prove your point, Mr. Kennedy?”

“Oh, it wouldn’t be a waste,” Mr. Kennedy said, thumb grazing one of the open peach buds while looking up under his brow. “I’m only in it for the smile.”

“You’re very sure of yourself.”

“Only when it counts.”

Will huffed. “Does it always work—the persistence?”

“I only need to work this once.”

Fuck me, Mr. Kennedy. Will was volleying, and Mr. Kennedy was returning every single one.

During this sly exchange, Beverly had made her way back—definitely not putting herself within listening distance, definitely not eavesdropping, and most definitely not preparing herself to save the situation should Will strike out. She coughed hard into her fist, and Will surprisedly turned his head around. Beverly gave Will an intense, wide-eyed gesture while mimicking typing on her phone.

NUMBER. She mouthed, her lips over-exaggerating each silent syllable.

Mr. Kennedy clearly saw this because he laughed gently, then spoke. “Listen—I’ll make it easy for you.” He said, reaching into his breast pocket, pulling out a small white card and a sterling silver pen. “This is my card.” He held up the front, then walked to Will and used his chest as a resting post. “This—” he scribbled “—is my personal number.” He slid the card into Will’s front pant pocket, not touching anything yet somehow touching everything. “Call me—if you’d like. I’ll bring a mess of flowers to your door.”

Will met his eyes, a shade of silvery green, flecks of yellow around the irises, somehow the perfect blend of rain and sunshine.

“It was lovely to meet you, Will Graham.”

Mr. Kennedy walked off, glancing back once and shaking his head like he couldn’t believe himself.

“*Ho—ly—shit*, Will,” Beverly said, stepping forward to stand next to Will, watching the handsome Mr. Kennedy walk off. “Give it maybe thirty minutes—then call that guy and let him fuck your brains out.”

“I’m not doing that,” Will said, turning around to resume his walk home.

“Ok—*you* fuck *his* brains out. Forgive me. I assumed you were a bottom.” She said, completely and utterly serious.

Will huffed ironically at the fact that Beverly thought he was a bottom. He didn't know why people assumed that. He was—hypothetically speaking—but that was beside the point.

"I'm not going to call him."

"What? Are you insane?" Beverly asked, rather monotone despite how hard she was staring at the side of Will's face.

Yes. Will was insane, but not as insane as the dark man he had waiting at his apartment who would be more than happy to insert that business card into his rolodex.

"I need to get home." Will asserted.

"So—call him tomorrow," Beverly argued, shrugging her shoulders, not really understanding how that could possibly be an issue.

"I'm not calling him tomorrow."

Beverly grabbed the small white corner peeking out from Will's pocket, snatching the business card before Will could grab her arm.

"*Holyshit*. Will—*he's a lawyer*."

Will stopped dead in his tracks, pausing as a thought shot through him hard, then continued walking.

"Well, then. I'm *definitely* not calling him."

"I don't know. Might be nice to have a lawyer in *your*—in *a* tight spot." She said, sticking her tongue out and sliding the card back into Will's pocket.

"My roommate wouldn't like it."

"Are you married to your roommate?"

Will attempted to answer that question honestly—failing miserably.

"No."

"*No*," Beverly said. "Sounds to me that you are all in the clear."

Will said nothing.

"Are you scared?"

"No."

Yes, he was. Of course, Will Graham was apprehensive about what could potentially follow these actions.

He and Hannibal were getting closer by the day. They shared personal space now without any questions asked. Of course, Hannibal hadn't made any physical advance yet, even though Will was trying to make it abundantly clear that he wanted. Sleeping with him. Showering next to him. Slipping into his clothing, trying to say, *Hey, I wanna be inside your shit*, without actually saying it. But Hannibal had not made a single move toward a physical relationship. Then again, he didn't want to ruin anything. The second he relinquished even an inch, Hannibal would start taking miles, and he didn't know if he was ready for that.

Maybe that's not what Hannibal wanted. Maybe he appreciated the platonic version of physical intimacy. The light touches. Will didn't understand how he could be so wrong about these things.

Of course, he'd never really gotten it right before. In every scenario where he should have known better—read the signs and followed them—he ended up alone. He chose the wrong women on a continual loop, following what he thought was mutual attraction, dancing around all the basic romantic overtures, only to find himself refused mid kiss. He should have guessed but didn't, refused to, laughed in the face of logic, choosing lips over—well—everything else.

Then, there was Mr. Kennedy, who had made his wants abundantly clear. Will didn't have to guess or posit or formulate or deduce. Mr. Kennedy wanted what Mr. Kennedy wanted, and Mr. Kennedy wanted Will Graham. There would be no waiting, no walking around desires, no coquettish tease lasting for what seemed like all eternity. No. Will could count on Mr. Kennedy to, at very least, drive directly to the point and take exactly what he wanted. What followed after was inconsequential.

Honestly, he was tired of having to second guess everything. Flowers, no flowers. Same bed. Separate beds. Touch. Don't touch. Talk. Don't talk. Kiss. Don't kiss.

The truth was, he knew Hannibal wanted a partner, someone who was his equal, and Will wasn't sure if he could ever live up to that expectation. At the end of the day, Will didn't believe he was—or could ever really be—the person Hannibal needed.

Maybe it wasn't such a terrible idea to entertain potentially dating other people. Maybe there was a world out there full of flaming trysts that would slip their burning brightness into his—pocket. He slid his fingers down, fondling the small slip of rigid paper.

Cooper Kennedy.

Hannibal Lecter.

How awful it had felt, looking back, watching Hannibal run off to a world full of those types of trysts, replacing him with a woman, a man, both presenting as somewhat adequate. Maybe that's what the man wanted. More of those types of things. Playing game after game with Will until—he didn't know—some random and unpredictable end was met. Hannibal was a grandmaster at manipulative games, working toward some unknown victory, and Will was sick and tired of figuring out what Hannibal was trying to accomplish—if he was trying to accomplish anything at all. Will would defiantly refuse to be a pawn on the Hannibal chessboard.

Hannibal had hurt him, and he didn't want to hurt anymore.

At that moment, Will realized that there were indeed men who wanted nothing to do with games, that simply wanted him for who he was, and Will could explore that if he wanted to. He had the right. No claim had been made. He had promised nothing. Feeling bound to Hannibal seemed nothing more than a sensation, something he continued to tell himself, a false narrative.

Was he settling for Hannibal because he simply hadn't tried anything else? Should he try something—someone else?

5.

Will and Beverly packed into the old elevator carriage, the small box bouncing and squeaking at their added weight. Beverly's eyes shot around the space with slight worry as Will put his silver key to the elevator panel. He yanked on the vintage door to close it, and the rusted runners stalled about an inch before the end. Now effectively trapped, they couldn't get out to go up the stairs, and of course, they lost cell phone service inside the lift.

"Ugh." Will groaned.

He would now have to jam the door shut to get the whole thing to move. Thus it would break on the fourth floor, and they would have to get it fixed first thing tomorrow. He put his fingers to his sternum and scratched.

Although he couldn't see it, he could feel it. The corner of the frayed red wallpaper was more prominent, almost speaking in a voice now, far worse than even the previous day. He would call the building superintendent first thing tomorrow and get the elevator and the wall fixed. No more annoyances. No more itching.

Beverly helped Will slam the gate shut, leaning their stiff bodies into the handle to hold it closed. Even their weight combined did nothing to abate the elevator's rattling. Will hated it. The sounds were to him like shaking pennies in the bottom of a jar—a reminder of how it was mostly empty.

When he finally walked through the door, it was something utterly unsettling about the entire apartment. Will looked at Hannibal, sitting in the living room, bare feet propped up on the ottoman, reading under the dim light.

"Hey you," Will said, pushing off his shoes and dropping his keys into the bowl.

Hannibal looked up, a soft smile on his face.

And suddenly, Will realized how empty his hands were. He should have gotten flowers. He shouldn't have followed the distraction. He should have thanked Mr. Kennedy and just

bought the *goddamn flowers*. He should have said *no, thank you* to Beverly's caring and generous offer, come home with a bouquet of snapdragons and taken Hannibal to bed.

At that moment, Will suddenly felt the gravity of the situation he had just created, the universe of that potentially perfect night imploding before his eyes.

It was too late now.

Things would shift yet again.

"That took longer than anticipated," Hannibal said, his maroon eyes glinted as they calcified, water turning to ice.

"Yeah. I had to help Beverly with some stuff." Pointing his thumb behind him as Beverly walked in, modest and respectful, unloading her things with caution.

"You missed dinner," Hannibal said, inquisition coating his stoic face as he stood to greet their new house guest.

"I know, I'm sorry. This is Beverly Katz. Beverly, this is Hannibal Lecter."

"Nice to meet you." She said, her black eyes completely absorbing his own, to the point that he nearly broke the gaze.

"The pleasure is mine," Hannibal replied, releasing her thin and calloused hands.

"Beverly is having some domestic issues. She's going to stay here for the night."

Hannibal tilted his head as his eyes slowly shifted from Will to Beverly and back again. "Shall I make up the sofa?" He asked.

"She'll stay in my room, Hannibal."

Beverly's eyes also shifted, except much faster, as she gathered all she needed to know about Will's relationship with his roommate. Feeling they needed a minute to chat, Beverly swiveled sideways. "I'll just—excuse myself," She said, ducking between the two men and escaping to Will's bedroom.

Will and Hannibal looked at each other only briefly, Hannibal releasing no information from his now solidified gaze.

"I believe I'll turn in," Hannibal said. He turned to walk down the hall but surprisingly stopped, looking back at Will with intention. "Aren't you coming?" He asked.

Will hadn't expected that. "I uh—I think I'll sleep in my room tonight."

"You're welcome to stay with me."

"All the same—I'll give you your space."

Then, Hannibal's tone shifted. It was both strange and comforting—a vulnerable sincerity that Will could not recall experiencing.

"What is this, Will?" The dark man asked.

Will took several steps closer to Hannibal, meeting him at the center of the hallway. His hand reached out, fingers running down the bare flesh of Hannibal's inner arm.

"Hannibal." He said calmly, his dusty eyes embracing the garnet gaze, his hand continuing to explore. Will took his flat palm and brushed it over the surface of Hannibal's stomach, firmly resting it before whispering, "She's just a friend."

"You don't have to run from this," Hannibal uttered.

"I'm not running," Will stated plainly, dropped his hand from Hannibal's body, and walked down the hall. His door opened and shut.

Beverly tread through the bedroom like a deer, avoiding furniture as if she were avoiding fragile antiques, looking around cautiously, not trying to pry, hands clasped under her chin. The only thing she touched was the corner of the chest of drawers when she unclasped her gold chain bracelet and set it there.

"You want a shirt?" Will asked, smiling at her sweetly, offering comfort and reassurance.

"That would be perfect, actually." She replied, relaxing almost instantly.

He went to his drawer, pulled out a plain white t-shirt, and tossed her the wad of folded cotton. She released the shirt from its creases and let it drape across her torso, checking to see that it would be large enough, then looked at Will with a laugh and winked. Of course it was large enough, silly man. She tip-toed to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

It was funny how this situation seemed awkward on the surface, but it felt effortlessly natural. There was nothing sexual or violating about it. Any other person might enter Will's room full of probing agenda or preconceived judgments, and it would feel uncomfortable, forced, and wrong.

Not with Beverly. It was as if she had already been in that bedroom a hundred times over, sharing the space with Will like a childhood friend at a slumber party. She somehow had the keys to Will's personal space, and it felt—nice.

Beverly came back out of the bathroom, still in her faded jeans, and gently dropped her tank top over her bracelets on the chest of drawers. She paused, hands at her belt loop.

"I have shorts on under this. Is it ok if I take these off?"

"No—please. Make yourself at home, Beverly." Will said, deciding to follow his own sense of comfort, throwing his shirt off and pulling off his jeans. He pulled back the sheets, and Beverly followed his lead, and together they climbed into bed. Beverly rolled to face him, both hands flat under one side of her face, smiling at Will.

Will laid on his back and sighed, his heavy chest expanding and then dropping half its size.

“How are you feeling?” Beverly asked quietly.

“I’m fine.”

“He’s kinda heavy, isn’t he? Hannibal, I mean. Like maybe he’s made of lead.”

Will huffed out a laugh. “That’s *exactly* how it feels sometimes.”

“Bit dramatic, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Beverly rolled onto her back, laying side by side with Will, staring up past the ceiling, far beyond the sky, into every known and unknown thought.

“I can see why you’re having trouble.” She said, strumming her fingers on her belly. “But *Mr. Kennedy*—that’s a score, right Will?”

Will took a long blink as he softly rolled his head back and forth on the pillow. “I don’t know about all that.” He said, blinking back up into their shared cloud of thoughts.

“It can’t hurt to try.” She said sweetly.

Will took another long blink, swallowing so hard that his Adam’s apple hitched. He knew all too well that it could hurt, physically and emotionally, with unparalleled and excruciating pain. He took his three fingers and scratched his sternum, suppressing the urge to whistle.

Beverly turned her head on the pillow to look over at Will, discovering the furnace that burned inside him and watching him struggle to snuff it out. She blinked softly, a tender smile easing her face, and she took her hand and dropped it over Will’s, subtle and sympathetic. She gave a slight squeeze.

“*It’ll all work out*,” She whispered.

Will said nothing, only clutched her hand behind the darkness of his closed eyelids while he drifted toward sleep. As the strange day faded into another state, the coherent thoughts threading themselves together amongst the abstract ones, Will laid beside Beverly, considering her presence in his bed. The weight of her body was so unlike Hannibal’s. She had been right. Hannibal was like lead. When they slept together, Will sank into Hannibal’s heavy body, encompassed by his gravity, falling somewhere far deeper than sleep. At that moment Will realized how different it was to lay beside those two individuals.

How divided and distinctly different intimacy was, separated by a sheer veil that felt like miles of space.

Will could hold Beverly close, and while it might be calming, soothing, like a lullaby on a stormy night, it would never satiate the way it should. Will wasn’t in-love with Beverly. His

closeness to her had sincerity and intensity, but it lacked the smallest yet most ineffable of sensations.

How different friendship was from—

From what Will? Say it.

No. Open the drawer. File away. Slam it shut.

Whatever this feeling he had for Hannibal was—it couldn't possibly be *love*.

BEYOND THE WALLS

1.

Hannibal pressed the dimpled peel of a halved orange to the spire of the ceramic juicer, twisting in a forceful squeeze, ringing the acidic fluid from its flesh. Six vibrant Valencia oranges in total, and Hannibal produced the two small glasses of solvent. The conventional morning beverage acted as the perfect base for this specific cocktail. The pulpy juice covered all visual evidence, while the vitamin C served as an enhancing agent to the overall effects. It was a simple and elegant convergence of all the things Hannibal needed to enact his surreptitious plan.

He moved one glass to the scale and tared it, bringing its weight to zero. He unstoppered the small amber vial, suctioned a few drops into the siphon, then dispensed exactly 10mcg of liquid. He resealed the bottle and returned it to its home inside a porcelain screw-top container in the back of the fridge.

Careful to specifically address the laced drink first, he moved the glass from the scale and placed it next to Will's breakfast plate.

It was Hannibal who decided that they should accompany each other on more outings. This was resolved on two separate occasions: once internally as Hannibal lay awake, straining his hearing to maximum effort, sometimes silencing his breath completely to hear what was happening at the end of the hall, when Ms. Katz stayed the night, knowing whether he heard something or not, separation would have to happen quickly. The second time was verbal, over dinner last night, the Thursday following that duplicitous event.

"I would appreciate your company tomorrow if you can spare the day at work." Hannibal had asked as they sat across each other in the dim candlelight.

Will admitted he would enjoy that and conceded to their first outing with seemingly innocent glee.

"Sounds like fun."

Hannibal did his best to avoid Will's perception, which was keenly more honed than ever before, while convincing Will this was nothing more than an attempt to quell his own loneliness. His true intention was, of course, to monopolize all of Will's free time while simultaneously romancing him with flirtatious gestures. If there were some malicious intent behind it, ulterior motives, and games being played, Hannibal hid them beneath the excuse that all his actions were ones attached to love.

Hannibal knew that nothing specious had happened last Saturday night. He would have smelled or heard something, and both parties would have had vastly different dispositions the morning after. No, it seemed that Beverly Katz was indeed a friend of Will's. However, the fact that they were not engaged in a sexual relationship offered absolutely no comfort to the seething resentment that filled Hannibal's heart like pus into a wound.

Will had, previously, always been incredibly guarded when it came to his personal space and belongings. A fortress that required permission to enter. Hannibal, the man he ran away with, the man he shared an apartment with, the man who he very often shared a bed with, was still not allowed inside. But a young woman who worked at a dilapidated shipyard who knew Will for less than three months gained entrance with ease. It was as if she always had the key, and she was simply waiting for Will to walk into her life and provide the lock it filled. Not only did Will want to sleep in his own room—close himself off once again—he now needed another person to serve as a safeguard. This was Will's added line of defense against his own feelings, something Hannibal was trying to respectfully, if not longingly, reach.

It was insulting.

Will returned to Hannibal's bed last night, but it wasn't enough. Not for Hannibal. While a delicate approach was still needed, it seemed remaining entirely hands-off was no longer an option. Hannibal would subtlety and safely take Will outside of his discomfort, expand him beyond his own walls of existence, using the smallest amounts of psychedelics. Liquid concentrate LSD was the easiest for Hannibal to both attain and hide.

Hannibal looked at his wristwatch. 9:00 AM. He preferred that Will consume his cocktail prior to 10:0 AM to ensure it didn't disrupt his sleep patterns later. He was late rising, but they still had time. Hannibal sat down, about to open the newspaper and wait.

Moments later, the young man stumbled in, soft curls dislodged in every direction, a pair of cotton joggers on his legs.

They were thin, probably thinner than Will knew. Hannibal's eyes etched around each muscle that dented and rippled, taking a moment to appreciate the prominent bulge that pressed the fabric tight at the center of his legs. If Hannibal were any other man, he would have dropped to his knees right then. Given a couple of hours, though, he might not have to initiate any advance. The possibility loomed that the mountain would come to him.

Will sat down. "You did everything this morning," He said in his low morning voice.

"I couldn't bear to wake you. You slept so peacefully."

Will smiled tenderly, his dust blue eyes as sweet as sugar. "Ah—well, thank you." He replied and then started his breakfast. The first thing he did was swallow his entire 8 oz glass of orange juice.

Hannibal watched intently, then averted his eyes, checked his watch, and returned to his food plate.

One hour and counting.

"Do you have work today?" Hannibal asked softly, ensuring that their plans were still intact.

"No, they were fine with me taking the day off," Will said, drinking the coffee that he was unaware was decaf. "What are we doing?"

Hannibal's eyes glinted, alight with a giddiness that he poorly concealed. "I have several things planned."

"Around town?" Will asked.

"Almost exclusively."

"What do I need to wear?"

"Smart casual," Hannibal replied.

Will stared at him blankly.

Hannibal smiled. "Something you'd wear on a date."

2.

The sound of a phone vibrating against any surface was one Hannibal found repulsive. Despite having perfectly adequate hearing and vision, Will insisted on keeping his phone silenced but his haptics on. It wasn't something Hannibal noticed at first, simply because Will rarely received calls or messages. The occasional conversation with his new friend from work and emails from his boss. That was it.

But as of late, Will's phone was buzzing between one and twenty-nine times in a single hour. It went off so often, in fact, that Will no longer left it unattended. This made it impossible for Hannibal's usual phone check, which happened cautiously while Will was in the shower or out smoking. The man was now glued to that tiny device and refused to part with it for any reason.

Hannibal had no idea who was contacting Will or why the number of messages seemed to increase dramatically over the past week. Hannibal learned to listen for it from afar, counting each annoying buzz like a tally on his patience and curiosity, increasing his frustration by the notification.

Will laid on Hannibal's bed, flipping through a book of poetry, watching and waiting as Hannibal completed his pre-outing rituals, which consisted of exponentially more things than his regular routine. Will had been ready for nearly an hour now. All of this was a precaution, of course. Hannibal certainly could have dressed quicker, but he continued to monitor Will as the drugs took effect, which to his surprise, happened smoothly without any adverse symptoms thus far.

Hannibal pulled on a navy blue pea coat just as the muffled buzz tore out of the white down comforter in the canyon where the phone lay. Hannibal knew that between two and one-hundred and twenty seconds, Will would pick up the phone, interrupting the moment, and respond with several soft taps.

It was two seconds. Perhaps less. Hannibal watched through his floor-length mirror as Will picked up the phone with a smile. He typed with his propped arm approximately eight words, then tossed it back to the bed—face down. He always placed it face down in the rare moments it wasn't in his hand or pocket.

What eight words could he have just formed, and what location out in the ether were those words going to land? Who was receiving them and why? Will was welcome to continue down this road, but if he did—if this didn't eventually stop—Hannibal would learn everything he had to and act accordingly.

3.

August became September only a day ago, and it was as if the world had ripped back the heated blanket from the city, allowing it to breathe again. The sky adjusted its aperture and hue, turning crystal clear and vivid blue. The air-dropped just into the crispness of a sweet apple, accentuated by the occasional coolness of a breeze through the barely altering trees. Almost every pale green leaf was accented by orange, red, and yellow.

Will did, in fact, dress for a date. Espresso chinos and a stone blue flannel utility shirt that loosely draped over his torso, somehow making his rigid frame soft. His tan boots had, most assuredly, been worn for over a decade, but it didn't detract from the outfit. Actually, it rather added to it. Every chocolate curl had nestled into a home only to be tugged gently by the wind. Just recently, Will purchased a charcoal military jacket. Hannibal found it surprising because the jacket didn't seem to fit Will's previous style. It was an incredibly sophisticated choice that looked exceptional on Will. He was devilishly handsome, put together with precision.

Perfect for a first date.

Hannibal could not have asked for a more splendid day.

Hannibal continued to monitor Will's behavior, paying close attention to his body temperature (sweat or jacket removal) and his cognitive function (steady walking, speaking coherently). Still, as all of those things continued uninterrupted, Will's personality enhanced, doubling in passion and meaning and intent. No matter how thin, a layer was drawn back, and the young man seemed more at ease with himself than Hannibal had ever previously seen. He sparkled like rain-soaked pavement in the sunshine after a passing storm.

They got a somewhat early start. The Friday farmer's market had set up just down the street, and Will and Hannibal browsed through the stands on their walk, thus making it their first destination. The first stand was canned goods and homemade preserves, but they also had three ascending bundles of pure white daisies. Hannibal strolled past, not generally stopping at that stand when he had to stop because Will had stayed. He turned around to watch the young man hand a few dollars to the woman in exchange for a single free-stem flower. Then, like someone whispered magic into him, revealing his propensity for all things charming, Will walked up to Hannibal and slid the stem into the buttonhole of his lapel.

“Fresh as a daisy,” Will said with a smile, making clear and intentional eye contact with the taller man.

Hannibal’s face softened into a smile as they continued down the open boxes and baskets of colorful vegetables that would soon be out of season, thin skin over juicy centers replaced by thick shells covering fibrous flesh.

“I wanted to buy you flowers the other night,” Will said, hands in his pockets, eyes crawling around the assortments he passed.

Hannibal hitched in his step. It was a strange announcement, not because of the act itself, but that Will even contemplated those things, and then furthermore, that he hadn’t gone through with it.

“Which night was that?” Hannibal asked.

“Last Saturday—after work,” Will replied, not nearly as meek as he could have been.

“Why didn’t you?”

Will shrugged softly. “I uh—I was with Bev. We got distracted. Maybe I thought better of it.” He said, pausing his body to wait for Hannibal to take the two steps and reach him, continuing together when they did. “Do you like flowers? Being bought flowers?”

“In gesture, of course. The symbolism assigns meaning to the flower you choose and, by extension, the moments in which they are given.”

Will stopped suddenly, a surprised look plastering his face.

“*Hannibal.*” He said in slight shock. “Have you *never* been given flowers?”

The morning cocktail was working wonders for Will Graham's empathetic insight.

“I’ve arranged many bouquets in my lifetime,” Hannibal replied.

“Yeah, but has anyone ever picked out flowers and given them to you as a gift?”

“No,” Hannibal said shortly, continuing to walk, eyes forward.

“So *wait*—am I the first person to ever give you a flower?”

“Yes.”

“*Wow*. What a moment, Hannibal.” Will said, petting the smiling face of the brilliant white blossom with his finger as they walked. “*I deflowered you*.”

Hannibal experienced a small death brought on by the fast escalation of happiness. He wanted to hold Will and never let him go. They weren’t an hour into this day, and Will was already taking virginities that Hannibal didn’t even know he had. It no longer mattered the

bouquet he missed or why Will had chosen to forgo the gesture on Saturday, Hannibal had a daisy, and no one would ever again give him a daisy for the very first time.

They walked farther down the block, taking a left and heading down toward one of their shared favorite locations. Then they walked farther beyond their small four-block radius, put into the other parts, searching for new secrets the borough had to offer. They slipped into their usual rare and used bookstore, both elated to be there, both knowing they could easily spend hours inside without issue.

Langston's was toward the south side. It had an old PVC awning that Hannibal was sure covered a wooden or stone facade, but the removal was probably put off, forgoing aesthetics to pay wages during the plight of the modern bookstore. The inscription was half worn away, a large part of the S and A missing. Beneath, two large book trollies loaded down with 2 for $5 selections. Since it was Friday, the store was next to empty. Everything was going to plan, except—of course—for the dull buzz of Will's phone that punctuated almost every free thought.

As Hannibal drew the door open and Will walked in, he heard the phone vibrate inside Will's jacket pocket.

How many seconds before looking? Hannibal thought. What emotional reaction would follow? How many words would be sent as a response? How long until the phone sounded again?

Inside, walnut floors creaked loudly, sounding so much louder when struck against the silent musings of readers. Several red ornate rugs were spread over the more open areas to diffuse the sound, which worked for those areas.

Every shelved corridor wafted the fragrant smell of time.

Mildew and vanilla. Day-old coffee grounds. Parchment that was processed in London, Paris, Rome. The words they contained tracked the vernacular of the time period, jotting it down like dates, only witnessing full potential as it decayed under the dull light inside a used bookstore.

Will and Hannibal's bodies were not dissimilar. The smells gave the odor of limits—end and mortality. Everything would diminish, given enough time. Who would open the pages of their history, reading a story worth noting? How many people would scan for personal meaning as their eyes crept across the lines?

Will wandered ahead into the confining, tightly packed labyrinth. Hannibal continued to monitor, never far behind, occasionally watching how the young man handled the books or if he swayed when he stood. No such thing happened. Will was far more resilient than Hannibal had previously thought, and Hannibal considered increasing the dose as soon as tomorrow. Then again, this seemed to be the perfect level. Perhaps he wouldn't press his luck.

Once both had made their selections, they sat near the front window in their usual seats—Hannibal in the tufted mohair mustard yellow wingback to the right and Will in the burgundy leather armchair that had been sat in so many times that the shiny varnish had worn off the

armrests and head cushion. The two chairs sat caddy-corner to each other, a table between them illuminated by a green ceramic lamp that was probably an excellent decorative choice in 1979.

Both men had watches. Neither man checked them. They sat there for as long as they wanted, Hannibal ensuring Will drank the mineral water he purchased at the market. The silence they shared was forgotten, not thought of, not an issue that needed to be addressed as it would be with most other individuals.

It was only when Hannibal noticed Will's hands begin to tremble that the silence was broken, and he took it upon himself to soothe the young man. Dropping the timbre of his voice to one he knew calmed Will, Hannibal started to speak on a topic that diverted his attention from panic and redirected the energy to confidence.

"Are you familiar with the Leicester Codex, Will?"

Will looked up from his book with raised eyebrows, his eyes soft and innocent, then shook his head.

"It is the rarest collection of scientific writings by Leonardo Da Vinci that details his observations and theories on astronomy, the properties of fossils, and the movement of celestial light—waxing and waning of the moon. What's notable about the text is not that very few editions exist, nor that it controversially shifts the origins of these theories back several hundred years. The notoriety is found in how Da Vinci noted that he was aware that both things were true and that the writings would one day become a collector's item."

"Quite the narcissist," Will replied.

"Narcissistic or *self-aware*? It's one thing to make claims that falsely inflate who you are perceived to be. It's something entirely different to know you have the truth and state it honestly for the world to see. Hiding helps no one."

"Those theories could have just as easily been disproven, then he would have looked like an egomaniac," Will said, gently arguing the point with a wave of his no longer trembling hand.

"But they weren't," Hannibal said with a head tilt. "Da Vinci had knowledge of who he was. That gave him the capacity to understand the inherent attributes of the natural world in a way his fellow scholars only dreamed of. It was his ego, *as you call it*, that drove him to greatness."

"Intrinsic knowledge doesn't always denote extraneous understanding," Will said, returning to his reading.

"Neither human nor physical property exists in contradiction to its nature, Will—only in contradiction to our understanding."

For a moment, however brief, Will looked up and caught Hannibal's eyes with awareness and understanding—steady as a river.

The chilly morning had all but faded when Will and Hannibal walked out of the bookstore, and Will presented his face to the newfound warmth of the sun, closing his eyes and absorbing it. Hannibal smiled, waiting patiently for the young man to join him. It was the lunching hour, which meant all the bodies inside buildings emerged, searching and scouring for food, like ants pressed from a hill.

The sidewalk became a game of polite dodging as some individuals walked on their side of the street with purpose and others practically played hopscotch, swirling back and forth, oblivious to the existence of other humans. Unfortunately, Will landed somewhere in the middle, sometimes staying straight and small, other times completely distracted by his phone or his wondering gaze.

Hannibal was playing lookout for the both of them, patiently waiting when Will would veer off, then making room when he would return.

It wasn't long before an incident occurred.

A young man on a skateboard took off just as Will took one step in the wrong direction. With one fluid movement and not a moment too soon, Hannibal yanked at the crevice of Will's waist, pulling him quickly aside. It was a very small grab, if not somewhat forceful, yet Will allowed his body to be scooped up by the larger man, throwing both arms almost entirely around Hannibal's neck.

Their faces hovered above one another, noses nearly grazing, breath sharing through their barely parted lips. Surely they looked into each other's eyes, but neither man noticed, feeling more connected than they previously had—that perhaps Will had slipped from the walls of his own body and slid into Hannibal's. It was easy for Hannibal at that moment to realize the enticing nature of their shared bed, how being closely pinned to the young man made him an invincible and protective god.

The danger passed, and Hannibal hesitantly loosened his grip.

"Thank you," Will whispered into Hannibal's mouth as he allowed his body to drop from the hold.

Then the unpredictable Will Graham released Hannibal for only a moment, then took his arm, slid it under Hannibal's jacket, and wrapped it tenderly around the man's torso. Hannibal's heart thudded wild inside his beastly chest.

Will had these small, fleeting moments of pure gold, glinting like diamonds on the wall of a mine, something Hannibal wanted to excavate.

One such example was the young man's intently deep memorization of poetry. He could quote almost any poet, line for line, at least so far as Hannibal had tested. It all started somewhat randomly one morning as Will leaned against the counter, peering down at the

morning paper while he sipped coffee. Hannibal, witnessing the beautiful moment, had simply said,

“Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity,”

And out of nowhere, Will had followed with,

“And I may say innocence, with Nature herself.” He was sweet, if not rather smug, peering from the corner of his eyes over at Hannibal, a sly fox grin across his lips. “Walden.” He said, winking over another sip of coffee, then took his leave to the fire escape.

While it wasn’t all that surprising that the man had read Walden, it seemed to Hannibal at the time like a spark and inclination of another surprise, and Hannibal decided to follow it like a Will Graham scavenger hunt.

The next time was several weeks later, to ensure Will wouldn’t see what he was doing, and Hannibal randomly uttered,

“From what I’ve tasted of desire—“

and Will responded,

“—I hold with those who favor fire.”

And that was it. Hannibal followed again and again, more and more often, testing Will with more complicated poems from far less famous authors. Will was a poetic prodigy, and Hannibal figured he had the entire lexicon of all poetic verse locked inside his mind.

Since then, the two would occasionally exchange these short stanzas and smile. Of course, it couldn’t sound too much like a setup, or Will wouldn’t respond. It had to come freely, be of the moment, fit perfectly in the situation surrounding it, and Will would reply like a timid songbird.

As Will refused to release the larger man, elation sending Hannibal to a cloud far above the heavens, he said low in an almost growl from the loving and possessive pit of his deepest heart,

“Their relationship consisted—“

Will blinked softly with a barely noticeable grin and replied

“—in discussing if it existed.”

Hannibal draped his arm around Will’s shoulders and tucked him in close, and together they continued their journey, arm in arm.

Four more blocks and Will and Hannibal arrived at the Westbreaker Arthouse Theatre, where Hannibal purchased two tickets to a French film called Un Frère.

Through mostly silent imagery with no background music, the film told the story of two young boys over the course of a summer when their families shared a beach house.

Will and Hannibal were coated in pastel light as they watched the story unfold. They watched two young boys walk through the heartwarming epiphany of their love, the treacherous betrayal when they denied that love, and the resolute ending when they could do nothing more than succumb to the love that would eventually shatter them both.

Hannibal watched most of the movie with an interrupted focus—his eyes shifting beside him to ascertain how Will was taking the film. The darkroom, the loud white noise of beach waves, the light of the flashing picture flushed everything—muting even breath. Whenever Hannibal looked over at Will, he saw his chin resting in the cradle of his forefinger and thumb, occasionally stroking his whiskers. Yet there was one time, only once, when Hannibal looked over to find Will blinking back a reflective pool that welled inside his eyes, the square white screen refracting off the darkened, wet irises.

Even in these small things, Will was becoming more comfortable expressing himself, brought to tears by the moving tale of innocent love.

In a scene near the end, the two boys laid in bed together, kissing until they crossed the boundaries of exploration and lost their virginity to each other. The romantic scene, filled with shaky breaths and apprehension, followed by a sense of irreverent calm and rightness, took Hannibal back to a place he had stored away, far beyond the walls of his mind. He remembered a time when his body was alabaster, stone and perfect, when love was nothing more than a nameless, physical sensation. How easy it was, back then, to surrender to such innate desires, laying with someone who could elicit both fear and ease.

Hannibal could recall those first kisses and how they tasted of dewdrops, new in the spring of his life.

He looked over at Will once more without care to conceal his stare and thought about how much he would like to hold his hand, kiss the side of his face, and brush his nose into the curls that fell like puffy wisps. Will looked over, finally noticing the attention, and did nothing but smile sweetly.

They left smiling.

Will and Hannibal playfully bickered for a few minutes about the film, as was Will's way of showing his enjoyment of the film—to berate its every flaw. Hannibal, on the other hand, saw the personality trait yet still could not resist opposing Will's opposition.

Will made the argument that there was 'no way in hell' that they passed notes under a wall that thick. Hannibal countered, dead set on convincing Will that one 'the scene is intended to evoke a sense of longing, whether probable or not' and two 'the wall couldn't have been more than an inch thick.' He quipped, staring Will down with a sly face as if eye contact alone would finally convince Will.

Whether he was convinced or not truly didn't matter to Hannibal—in the end—because only moments later, as they walked from the Theatre door, Will tucked himself back under Hannibal's large, protective arm.

6.

The hidden shadows of midday started to show themselves as afternoon drifted into evening, bright spaces transforming into dark, sharp angles highlighted in orange. Will remained sturdy, still unbothered by potentially negative side effects, still maintaining his easy and chipper disposition. So easy, in fact, that he asked if Hannibal wanted to go out for a drink instead of heading home. Hannibal considered how alcohol might affect Will's current state, and while one or two would be harmless, Hannibal would have to veer them away from another multi-bottle night—no matter how fun the last one was.

They went to an old bar, a safe haven for gay men in the 80s, a place Hannibal had been to before because he knew the bartender. The facade matched every other facade on that old block because, just like most spaces now, it was bought, painted with an ironic earth tone shade of beige, filled with repurposed palate wood and dangling succulent plants. They added complicated names to basic drinks and charged three times the amount—the interest rate of modernity.

They wandered in. Hannibal ordered a lavender sprits soda water and gin cocktail called *'Sunny Zest,'* and Will ordered a double whiskey neat. Even though it was called *'Good Sir,'* he still just said, *double whiskey neat*. Two drinks in, and the bill was undoubtedly $30. Hannibal could tell that Will was uncomfortable in the space, a rigidity that stiffened his shoulders, his head swiveling around like he was checking if they'd been tailed, anxious about the crowd surrounding him. Once again, Hannibal moved to help rid Will of his anxiety by talking him through it.

"This was once a Mollies Club, during the time of The Lavender Scene."

"Like a speakeasy?" Will asked.

"They were clandestine clubs for homosexual men throughout the 18th century. Such establishments were a societal safe haven for those communities, and bars such as these continued to offer security when none could be found in the streets outside." Hannibal explained. "I frequented an establishment very similar to this one when spaces such as these were the only locations for free expression."

Will turned in his seat, opening himself up and sinking into the words, sharing the past with Hannibal like a tether. Hannibal had started out trying to comfort Will but mindlessly fell into his own trap, finding himself comforted by Will's care and attention.

Hannibal started talking like he never previously had. Even to him, it seemed odd, as if he were listening to his own voice repeated back to him on a tape recorder, but it was candid,

uninhibited by extensive metaphor. He walked back to times in his youth, the experiences of the time period for a man who liked men. Those memories were fond ones, despite the setting being far more dilapidated and dangerous. Booth holes, graffiti, floors warped and mildewed by hot beer, ghastly punk music played on half-broken guitars and sound equipment, and men who tasted of Marlboro menthols and smelled of patchouli.

“It looked and felt of filth because it was; coated in grime and reeking of decay. It was the corner we were pressed into, the last sewers of society. Most of my life has been dedicated to the fastidious opposition of such constructs that claimed I, or any of my kin, belong in those uncivilized slums.”

Will seemed to hear him—every word he was saying, on every level he spoke. His eyes, now cornflower blue in the dim light, reflected the screen that was Hannibal’s intention.

“If you belong there...then I belong there,” Will admitted, his two fingers playing along the top of Hannibal’s hand.

How many different ways could that statement be taken? Thousands. But Hannibal knew that Will, for the very first time, was admitting to the desires that had remained hidden beneath the surface his entire life. Will was a killer, and Will was a killer who liked men.

“You carry with you the space you belong to, and with that, the room we share. I intend to ensure no one encroach on that, sending us to the very edges of this life, controlling what does not belong to them,” Hannibal replied, interlacing a few fingers with Will’s.

They looked into each other for what seemed like an eternity.

Then, Will’s phone buzzed.

Their eye contact split immediately.

Hannibal suddenly knew he wouldn’t have to worry about two drinks turning into ten. The moment had disappeared, the charm and beauty broken by the jagged blade of a phone’s vibrating haptic. Will asked the bartender for another drink and tapped the screen. It illuminated his face, and he picked it up, smiling wide, then started to respond but stopped. He set the phone down for a second just as he was handed his cocktail.

“I’ll be right back.” He said, hand grazing Hannibal’s shoulder as he walked off to the lavatory.

Hannibal peered over at the phone, accidentally left face up, as the screen ignited once again. He saw the text message if only for the brief moment it remained on the screen before fading out.

Why don’t you let me take you out, Will Graham?

It wasn’t Ms. Katz. Her number was programmed into Will’s contacts. This did not have a name associated with the 1-212-704- and that was all Hannibal could see before the phone

was snatched away. Will returned for the half-second it took to retrieve his phone, then walked away.

Hannibal's perturbation had just enough time to stew from a simmer to a boil, and by the time Will returned, not two minutes later, Hannibal was ready to start a line of questioning.

"Do you enjoy living with me?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't," Will said, sitting back down with a soft groan.

Hannibal was aware of how true and untrue that statement was. Will spent all his life squeezing himself into places he didn't belong, claiming he wanted to be there, bursting at the seams. But he also knew Will had allowed Jack Crawford to throw him around, not because he was saving lives, but because he wanted to.

"You've been rather distracted," Hannibal stated.

"What do you mean?" Will asked, taking a sip of his whiskey, and as if on cue, his phone buzzed again.

"Your mobile," Hannibal insisted, unironically.

"Is it bothering you?"

"It never ceases."

"The ringer is off."

"And yet I am still aware that it never ceases."

Will picked up his phone, opened it, tapped a few times, then locked it again.

"There," Will replied, tersely. "Vibrate's off."

Hannibal blinked over his exasperation. "Must be an interesting conversation—one you feel compelled to conduct through every facet of your day."

"I won't open it again if that's what's bothering you."

"Who are you speaking with?"

"I don't have to tell you that."

"I think I'm entitled to know."

Will dropped his head between the valley of his shoulders, exhaling a sigh. He wiped his face, then stared at the liquor wall.

"Listen—I meant to tell you earlier—I mean, I intended to then didn't—but—I've met someone."

“You’ve met someone?”

“Yes—a—uh—a man,” Will said, clumsily stumbling over every syllable.

“A man.”

“Yes.”

“And this man is who you’ve been speaking to all day and night?” Hannibal asked, heat welling up around his collar.

“Yes.”

Hannibal took a moment’s pause, and there should have been a deep breath there to calm him, but there wasn’t. He fired another question long before logic came in to stop it. “What’s his name?” He asked curtly.

“I’m not telling you his name,” Will answered, now somewhat monotone and unbothered.

“Where did you two meet?”

“I’m not telling you that either.”

“So, I’m not to know anything about this person you are now speaking to so often that it has become a topic you have to reveal in a confession?”

And then something happened.

“It isn’t anything serious, Hannibal. I’ve never done this. I have no idea what I’m doing. I’m terrified, but I’m also excited. I enjoy living with you and being with you, but you’re the one who is always telling me to follow my nature, and I just wanted to see—you know—what it felt like to receive that kind of attention from someone.”

The words all stumbled out of Will in a long-running sentence of thought, like a small floodgate had been lifted inside to release the pressure of the dam. An odd sensation swept over him, something similar to sympathy, that just wanted to help Will. But he would not allow yet another blatant insult to be thrown at his feet.

“Do you remember why you came with me, Will? Why you decided to live with me?" Hannibal started, trying to collect his patience.

“I had nowhere else to go.”

“Those were not the words you used our last night in Wolf Trap when you lay beside me on your small bed claiming—“

“Hannibal.” Will interrupted rather aggressively. “I don’t want to talk about the night in Wolf Trap. I’m never going to want to talk about that night. Stop bringing it up.”

“Denial does not erase the past.”

“I don’t have to deny it, Hannibal. I don’t remember it—and I don’t want to remember it. That is a story I no longer have to tell myself. Look, I like living with you, but that doesn’t mean I am obligated to regulate my life for you. You’ve done this in the past, and from what I last recall, you wanted to change all that.”

Will was continuing his honesty, just as Hannibal wanted. Hannibal enjoyed honesty as a concept. He did not enjoy its contents. Hannibal had wished for this, and now, he didn’t wish for it at all. Will was beyond his walls, and now he was slowly escaping Hannibal’s ability to find him. So Hannibal tried to admit his wants and desires, hopeful that it wouldn’t scare Will off. How wrong he was.

“It’s impossible to seek a relationship with you while you actively cultivate another,” Hannibal said, softness covering his anger.

“Then I guess roommates is what we are,” Will replied, covering nothing.

7.

They avoided each other the rest of the night, yet Hannibal left his bedroom door open, still hoping that Will would enter, even if to silently slip into the sheets beside him. When he didn’t, Hannibal fell asleep, and the next day, when Will said nothing about the day before, Hannibal didn’t either. Day turned into night, and the cycle repeated itself three times, moving them farther and farther away from trying, however ineffectively, to communicate rationally. Hannibal went through the days in silence, avoiding the question he couldn’t bring himself to ask. But it was there on a constant loop, as constant as the days it occupied, sitting stubbornly just between Hannibal’s eyes, as immovable as a tumor.

But the fourth evening, Will came into the kitchen where Hannibal was rinsing and preparing freshly harvested vegetables. It had been a long, sunny, sleepy day. The apartment had the warmth of an afternoon blanket. Will had responded wonderfully to his morning dose, the entire day filled with his gentle hand grazes and honest admittances and questions. The mood was light and communal, linked by pleasure and joy, like the warm nights they shared a bed.

The question came rolling forward when Will touched Hannibal’s lower back, asking what he was doing almost over the taller man’s shoulder, his breath and smell heating the space between them. Hannibal experienced a predictive sadness that he was about to actively ruin a perfect moment. Everything—the saffron sun surrounding them, their bodies side by side—had converged to a specific moment, only to have the God of Darkness come and destroy it.

“Are you going to see this man?” Hannibal finally asked.

Will released Hannibal and took a step back, leaning on the kitchen island.

“Yes.”

While it hurt, it was what Hannibal wanted to hear. He would have to meet this man if he were to ever figure out how to destroy him.

CRYPTIC BY NATURE

1.

The police would never find the person who owned that lease. Detectives would eventually get a warrant to search the ground floor and cellar after the smell became too much for the higher floors to stand. The building sat between Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen. The exterior was unassuming, gun-metal grey brick and small hazy windows, but inside, police would find the most debauched and vile things—a million artifacts of torture. All these things, and still the authorities had no one to blame. No charges would ever be filed. They would never know who rented the space, why it was abandoned—and more terrifying still—if that person was running free out in the world.

Hannibal ran his hand along the double insulated center block wall as he walked the perimeter, inspecting the space. The ceilings were high enough, with several reinforced beams running the room's width. The floors were concrete, painted a shade of cherry red.

Serendipity—Hannibal thought.

The two floors were once used as a kitchen. Then a flower shop. Elian Karlsson, the man who procured Hannibal's apartment in Williamsburg, also found this space, a renovated manufacturing floor that no one wanted because the walk-in coolers had a terrible stench, the blue neon sign of the club across the street flickered in the window non-stop 24/7, and the noise in that part of town made it hard to hear anything.

Even though the windows were small, the floor was well ventilated. It had a bathroom with a utility shower, multi-function power hookups, two entrances, one to the front and one to the back, and a retractable bay door that opened to a very private back alley.

It was perfect.

Hannibal purchased the location for many reasons, but the most important to him was Will Graham.

2.

"Are you going to see this man?"

Will released Hannibal and took a step back, leaning on the kitchen island.

The question took him aback, hitting him from left field after an otherwise perfect day. Both men had lounged under the shifting sun, bright in the morning, warm in the afternoon, and it seemed to them like a blanket of comfort. They had both been affectionate, gentle. Will hadn't put a shirt on because, honestly, he preferred to feel Hannibal's subtle touches without

the interference of fabric. He had avoided his phone almost the entire day, despite how many texts he knew were flooding the display.

Since their day out together last Friday, Will and Hannibal had been drawing closer, slowly but surely, and Will had pushed back the idea of Mr. Kennedy until it was nothing more than a flicker. Now Hannibal wanted to bring it up—again. This relentless questioning only hurt the delicate balance by which Will weighed Hannibal against Cooper Kennedy, dropping the scale abruptly toward the safer choice.

"Yes," Will answered, short, brief, to the point.

Hannibal's knife dropped heavy onto the cutting board, slicing a red beat as if it had been his heart. Will knew that the answer would cut, maybe it wouldn't be deep, but it would cut just the same. He also knew that Hannibal wanted to hear it. Hannibal didn't like Will having friends, let alone an alternative love interest. He would want to know who this guy was, if only to seek retribution.

"You think that a wise decision?" Hannibal asked.

It was a question, yes, but it didn't sound like one. Hannibal spoke with authority like—Will didn't know—like his dad.

That thought elicited an involuntary physical reaction. The spike of heat and odd levity surprised him. As did the overwhelming urge to be openly defiant. Will couldn't help how much he wanted to push back against Hannibal, test the boundaries, and see how controlling the large man could be. If Hannibal wanted to talk about this, Will would be more than happy to open this can of worms.

"I have no idea," Will said, hoisting himself onto the island and sitting with a slight hunch.

"Do you still insist on withholding his identity?"

"Well—we know your history in that department, don't we," Will replied, surprised at his own smug honesty. Lately, he had witnessed in himself that his thoughts came in clearly formed sentences, unabated by emotional whim, and he would state them with confidence. He wasn't sure what it was, but things seemed more visible to him, like a rippled reflection drawing to stillness on a pond's surface.

"We also know your history in that department. *Tell me, Will*. Do you intend to tell him about your past? Our past?" Hannibal said, turning around to face Will, brushing his fingers on his apron.

"Not on the first date," Will said, again very smug, and the joke did not seem to amuse Hannibal who stood like a scolding teacher, face sour and stone. "It's just a date, Hannibal." He offered.

"Does he know of your experience?" Hannibal asked, leaning against the counter opposite Will, clasping his hands as they hung in front of him.

"*My experience?*" Will's eyebrow raised in a high arch.

"Or lack thereof."

Will narrowed his eyes. He knew this game—this Hannibal Lecter game of inflecting an emotional state by bringing up insecurities.

"Does he know that I've never been with a man before—is that what you're asking?"

Hannibal raised his thumbs slightly from his interlaced hands, that haughty shrug of a gesture that made Will want to punch the man. "The dynamics of this man's interest in you may shift should he come to learn that information." He said.

"You're implying that this guy won't want me if he knew I was a *virgin?*"

"If those are the terms you'd like to use, yes. It's best to be honest about these things prior to any sexual encounter."

Now, Hannibal was dishing out sex advice. Perfect.

"What makes you think I want to sleep with him?" Will asked, tilting his head with a slightly raised chin.

"Because you do. You've been entertaining the idea of a man inside you for quite some time."

Will rubbed his face with a sigh. "*Jesus Christ, Hannibal.*" He said, leaning into his locked arms. "I'm not talking to you about this."

"Why not?"

"Because!" Will replied in almost a shout, then collected himself. "Because—I don't want to. I don't consider myself a *virgin*, and I'm not thinking about sleeping with this guy." Will gestured to the open air with a slashing hand.

"This is simply for your amusement, then."

"*No.*"

"You have no intention of connecting physically, nor do you intend to share the emotional turbulence of your past. I'm curious what topics of conversation you believe will be addressed on this date."

Will narrowed his eyes—again. "I have more to talk about than sex and trauma, *Hannibal*. You should know that by now."

"There are very few things I don't know about you, Will. I would take that into consideration." Hannibal replied as he untied and folded his apron.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“What do you believe is the nature of our relationship—yours and mine?” Hannibal asked, dropping the apron on the counter behind him and returning to his lean. “Your curiosities loom in this apartment like black smoke. You come to my bed and sleep beside me, clinging to thoughts about the touch of a man, entertaining fantasies wherein you might love a man, yet you have not approached me, nor have you discussed these feelings with me. Why?”

“*Why?*” Will repeated.

“I’ve made myself perfectly clear.”

“*Because I don’t belong to you, Hannibal*. That’s why. I’m not one of your little birds.” Will responded, and much to his surprise, he maintained eye contact throughout.

“I quite agree,” Hannibal responded cooly. “You’re much more than that, and I would venture to say much more than the person you’re being right now.”

Will felt his clavicle heat, surely splotched in hives by now. “Is that what you told Bedelia before you shit her out? Is that what you told Mr. Dimmond while you fucked him before twisting him into a sloppy valentine?” He spat out.

Hannibal launched across the kitchen and took Will by the face, large hand clenching tightly into the pale cheeks. Will halted, holding Hannibal’s wrist with both hands, inhaling shallow breaths, denying how it made his cock twitch. He looked into the flickering maroon eyes, sharp as a knifepoint, searing into his very soul with dominion.

“*I will have all of you—or I'll have nothing at all,*” Hannibal whispered, low and rumbling.

“Is that a threat, Dr. Lecter?” Will asked, steady inside the grasp.

“There are consequences to your actions, Will.”

And then, the words left Will’s lips like breath, an easy flow without any apprehension to stall them.

“*You’re not my father, Hannibal.*”

The glinting garnet irises searched Will’s face, clearly not expecting that response, now inspecting Will for intention and desire.

“Is that what you want?” Hannibal asked as he dropped his hand from Will’s face. He let it graze the column of Will's neck, down his pounding chest, across his belly, resting just above the hem of his pants. “*Someone to discipline you? Someone to take what they want?*”

Will’s heart struck heavy, vibrating thuds as Hannibal’s pulsing finger blades sat mere inches from his now stiff cock. It was all far too tempting, and once again, Will was overcome by the urge to disobey.

“That won’t work,” he said, leaning in to let his lips hover over Hannibal’s. “Because—it means nothing to you unless it’s given freely.” Will slapped Hannibal’s hand away and

propelled himself off the island, but before he could leave the kitchen, Hannibal stopped him.

“Will—”

Will paused at the doorway, refusing to turn his head.

“—don’t come to my room tonight.”

Will left the kitchen and went to his room.

3.

Last Friday was wonderful. Honestly, Will had never been treated that way, like a special item that needed caring for. He remembered the way his body tucked under Hannibal’s arm, the warm smell of his breath when the large man had scooped him up, and the tender nervousness in his shoulders. Today could have been wonderful, but Hannibal was incapable of dimming his obnoxious, narcissistic asshole tendencies.

Will’s phone illuminated for the eighth time. He looked over at his nightstand and tilted it up to read the message.

[Where’d you go?]

Will didn’t even have time to set the phone back down before another message popped up.

[Did I say something wrong?]

Will rolled his eyes and locked the phone, returning to his previous focus.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like the attention. He did. But Will had never been texted so much, and often when his phone wouldn’t stop, even into the early morning hours, it was slightly off-putting.

Cooper Kennedy was nice enough, but Will wasn’t sure when the guy slept because he texted at all hours, non-stop. Will was in a perplexing state of '*I enjoy this too much not to respond because I don’t want it to stop*’ and ‘*for the love of God, we haven’t even been on a date. Please just relax*.’

So he texted back almost every time except that day, and hence, that night when he was intermittent and sporadic with his responses. Will had left the last eight—now ten—messages unattended, and Mr. Kennedy didn’t seem to like that.

The phone buzzed again, but Will ignored it, laying on his back, arm tucked behind his head.

His middle finger made short strokes over the metallic mousepad under his laptop’s keyboard. The blue screen light, tinted in patches of black and orange, was the only light

inside his bedroom that night. The clock read 2:41 AM, and approximately three hours ago, the minutes had decided to slow their pace, stretching the night into eternity.

He wasn't sure why sleep was so difficult recently. It seemed every third or fourth day, he slept fine. On the other nights, he'd either be up well into the night or wake up far too early. In this case, it was both. He hadn't slept at all. Now, he was looking for something to help, and every fiber of his being told him to walk down the hall.

Just walk down the hall.

It's not that big of a deal.

He didn't mean it.

He'll hold you till you fall asleep.

Press his body against you.

That large rubbery cock.

Inside you.

He blinked hard in a twitch, then continued scrolling.

Will knew what he liked—to an extent. He was exploring more and more, easing into self-acceptance, one video at a time.

He started with the vanilla stuff. Hand jobs. Blow jobs. Rimming. Then moved into fucking with preferences, large older men breeding twinks, manhandling threesomes with commands and praise, and now he was up to double penetration and mild bondage, still preferring the large hairy men, especially in multiples.

Daddy was a word regularly used in the videos Will viewed. He couldn't hear himself saying it, but he liked how it sounded, liked the idea of it—the concept—but definitely not the practice. Who would he call *Daddy,* anyway? In this world of heavy moans and sweaty smacking bodies, Will could easily fantasize that anyone of those large hairy men could overpower him, torture him, bring him to the brink of death, all while tenderly whispering what a good boy he was—and that man would be worthy of the name *Daddy*. Perhaps if that man were real, and didn't live inside a computer screen, then Will would murmur that name with conviction.

For now, he only spoke it into the silence of his room.

What kind of porn did Hannibal watch—he wondered.

Would this turn him on? Will thought about Hannibal laying beside him, chin tucked, watching his own hands as they rode up and down his long shaft.

What that dick must be like when it's hard.

Will put none of these thoughts away—which was strange. He had never thought something like that without immediately regretting it. What was happening? It was as if the file cabinet in which he stored those things had disappeared. Every thought was now an action, no seconds left for contemplation. He let every single one send prickling heat to his pelvis. It was enough to arouse him past the point of patience.

Will randomly selected a video, put the laptop to the side, and found his cock, pulling it out of his pants and exposing its hot hardness to the open air. He touched the head, clenching his hips once, already so eager that the first stroke felt like freedom. He slowly spread his knees, legs dropping to the side, and eased into the euphoria.

Inside me.

Usually, he liked to watch. Tonight—the sounds alone were enough. He had other visuals already forming in his mind, so he shut his eyes and paired the fantasy world with the pleasure moans and harsh commands coming from the speakers.

He imagined his ass getting smacked, his cock rebounding between his legs as someone power fucked him with unrelenting force, large hands on his hipbones. How those dark eyes would look down under grey fringe, approving with uncontainable grunts, a slight snarl twisting the plump cupid's bow, sweat painting the tan and hairy body in a sheen.

Will's rough fingers continued to glide over his sensitive length, increasing his tempo, stroking the tingling skin from head to hilt, precum slowly leaking from the tip. He thought about how different Hannibal's hands were—those soft surgeon's hands—and how they might feel stroking at such a pace.

"*Ah—fuck—that's good,*" He whispered, tucking his chin up to watch himself through half-lidded eyes.

Those hands—the ones that could grip with force. The pulsing finger blades grazing over his aching cock, tendons tightened, veins popping from his wrists, coaxing cum out with precision. Warm and delicate, soft like velvet, Will imagined that's how Hannibal's mouth felt. He increased speed, cupping his balls as he thought of a wet tongue sweeping across them, swollen lips sucking softly.

"*Thatsit—thatsit*," He uttered again, encouraging himself.

Inside me.

The pressure built, the need to release rising, the thought of being spread open too much to contend with. He watched himself again, licking his dry lips over short, sharp exhales, the veins in his neck ready to burst. He heard the growls of a large man inside him, around him, laying in the white bed down the hall, Will told himself the story of how that would feel, making it real to the point that he shot thick white ropes onto his bare belly, threading a series of noises together in the form of a name.

"Daddy."

Will dropped his head back to the pillow, panting as stars littered his eyes. He collected his breath, falling back into reality with each inhale. A sudden rush of guilt swept through him as he reached for a tissue, thinking Hannibal would love to lick him clean. He wiped himself off, shut his laptop, and finally fell asleep.

4.

That was the night the voices started.

Perhaps they weren't voices. Later, Will would convince himself they weren't, merely whispers riding on the white noise from the streets below, but they were indeed voices. They were voices with personalities attached, inflections and tones that spoke in complete and coherent sentences. The first time, as a matter of fact, Will thought Hannibal was having a conversation with someone in the dining room.

Will woke at—he thought he checked the time, but he couldn't remember what it was—and got out of bed to investigate. He walked down the hall and through the living room in a half-dazed state, then popped his head through the dining room doorway, the glow of a moon so bright it seemed like the daytime sky.

No one was there.

It didn't seem like the voices were gone, though. More like he had walked in on a conversation about him, and everyone suddenly went silent. The irony of it all. Even the illusions in his head didn't like him.

Will walked in and pulled a chair out, the feet making a quick rubbing squeak, then sat down. The night traffic outside lulled quiet in comparison to the previous day. Everything had muted, near silent, but he knew the voices would speak again, given enough time.

Will waited.

A man spoke first.

Forget what you know about finding a dead body. If you find four at once, you'll never get the whole story.

Will narrowed his eyes, not like he was skeptical of the voice being authentic, but like he was skeptical of what the voice was saying. Will had worked for the FBI profiling killers. He could see and deduce quite a bit. Sometimes the whole story was simple to understand and not the mystery everyone claimed. He made this argument in his head, but it seemed tacitly understood as if he'd spoken it aloud.

You can see a lot, Billy Boy, but you won't see everything until the end.

Then another voice responded.

Don't listen to him, Mr. Graham. He's a psychopath.

Will thought he turned his head, like a reaction, toward another empty chair.

You know the story. You know it all too well. You won't have to get to the end to know everything you need to.

"What does that mean? You're a hallucination." Will said, this time actually audible.

Ah—I was wrong. You already know the ending, and you're just going to let it happen.

Will thought his sternum itched—burned—seared.

*Maybe **you're** the psychopath.*

"You've got the wrong guy," Will said.

You came here.

You came to us.

You chose this

You chose him.

Will thought he reached down to scratch his sternum, and when he did, a small corner of flesh peeled up. Will looked down at his bare chest, blood gushing from the crack in his skin. It didn't hurt, though. It felt amazing—liberating—a relief. He continued to pull the skin in a slow, stumbling yank, the tissue tearing from muscle and bone. He dropped a chunk to the floor, then went for another.

Ah—god. The itch was gone. It felt so good. Aloe on a burn. Water in the desert. More. Peel more. Take it all off.

Wait. A voice whispered.

Will looked up to the empty chair.

He's here.

Everyone silenced.

Will turned his head over his shoulder, and Hannibal was in the doorway. He jolted just barely, then gave the man a puzzled look.

"Hannibal?"

"What are you doing in here?" Hannibal asked, confused.

"I uh—I thought someone was here."

"You heard someone?"

“Yeah. Yeah—I thought I heard someone talking.”

“Stay here,” Hannibal said, walking off.

Will heard him striding across the apartment, jiggling handles and pushing on window sills. He returned moments later.

“There doesn’t appear to be an intruder, Will.” He said calmly. "Did you hear voices?"

Will gently nodded his head.

“What did they say?” Hannibal asked, taking a slow step into the room.

Suddenly, Will couldn’t think, the thoughts of the previous moment vanishing like a puff of smoke. “I uh—I don’t remember,” Will said, scratching his chest, skin still intact.

Hannibal laid his heavy, warm hand on Will's shoulder. “Come." He whispered. "You should sleep.”

Will gingerly stood, walking as if the ground were made of thin glass, and Hannibal continued to escort him to the hall, his hands steady—an anchoring weight. Will was unsure if he could go back to his room. He knew there would be no sleep waiting for him there, so he grabbed Hannibal’s elbow.

Hannibal stopped suddenly, then allowed his fingers to brush over Will’s, holding them. “What is it?” He said softly.

“Can I stay with you?” Will asked, hopeful and meek.

Hannibal collected Will’s fingers inside his own. “Yes.” He replied and took them down the hall.

Hannibal laid Will down, hands so delicate and precise, pulling the flocked throw from the foot to cover his shoulders. Hannibal climbed into bed next to him and laid on his back, draping the sheets over his torso. Will turned to him, much closer than he had ever consciously dared. He could smell the cherry blossom shampoo that marked Hannibal's hair and feel the deep breaths that expanded the monstrous chest. His eyes blinked softly, tired and worn, as they gently scanned Hannibal’s body.

“You think I’m going crazy again, Dr. Lecter?” He asked quietly.

“You’re not insane, Will,” Hannibal replied, eyes closed, a soft half-smile across his face.

Will mirrored the expression, softly chuckling. “Well—then you can talk to the voices next time.”

“I’ll politely ask them to leave.”

Will could do nothing more than look at the man beside him. The words were so sure of themselves. At that moment, it seemed to Will that there was nothing in the world that could

contend with Hannibal Lecter, and any apparition, real or otherwise, would vanish in his presence.

Will scooted over, nuzzling his face into Hannibal's arm. "Is this ok?" He asked, peering up through dark lashes. Hannibal looked over, meeting the young man's submissive gaze. He raised his arm, and Will accepted, laying his head on Hannibal's chest—burrowing with the tiniest motion into the soft greying hairs. Hannibal draped his arm with care and intention around Will's slim waist.

Together, they drifted past the care of what this gesture meant, far into the reaches of just allowing its comfort. Will couldn't posit in his half-conscious state, the complete thought too much for the ebb and flow of his dreams, but somehow he knew.

The thought. The fantasy. The bed. The man himself. All of them worked. If Hannibal was there, Will would sleep with ease.

5.

Will had been to Manhattan enough times to understand that even in the vast network of streets, buildings, and parks, there was very little space for a guy like him. The high blood pressure of Manhattan bled out people like Will Graham without regard, the cells refilling as quickly as they left.

Brooklyn, however, was the tepid space that caught the individuals pushed from other places, full of diversity and history, even if it was littered with the Pilates Studio and Juice Bar patrons who were there by choice, forever saying things like "*my how this area has grown*."

The buildings hadn't grown far outside the scale of human size. The limited spaces offered comfort, granting access to daily interactions with personal names attached, the familiarity of those not lost in a shuffling crowd. Will knew his neighbors. There were only five. Not dozens. He knew the guy down at the liquor mart, the twenty-something who flirted far beyond his capacity to handle, was Joshua from Crown Heights. Will knew the two clerks at the bookstore, Misty and Charlotte, a mother and daughter, who had run the shop for twenty-three years. It made this world one that Will could understand. Nothing was out of his reach.

While Manhattan collapsed in on small places like that, Brooklyn only expanded them. Access to these small originalities was what Will enjoyed the most about his new home. There were still spots where genuine people, with genuine struggles, worked to prop up the small yet fulfilling lives they lead. Shops and restaurants that had been owned for generations.

So when Will needed something fixed, he knew he could get it done fairly quickly. Everything he needed was in the neighborhood. A hardware store a few blocks away had tools and supplies, and their building superintendent wasn't much farther. He was always quick—almost immediate sometimes—to pick up the phone, and he always showed up at the exact time Will expected him to.

Will woke the morning after his delusional dinner of nightmarish voices, his sternum itching with unmatched intensity. Hannibal had already gotten up. Will could hear him bustling around in the kitchen. The bed was near perfection, apart from the small yet maddening irritation. Will flopped to his back and stared up at the ceiling, three fingers rubbing raw the rash on his chest.

He thought about the apartment—the building—how it spoke to him. This was all part of his imagination. He was lucid enough to understand that. Hannibal would have said this was a manifestation of some other irritation—an anxiety of some sort. Will thought back to when the itching first started. He thought about the peeling red wallpaper in the lobby and the godforsaken elevator, which had stalled on the ground floor, yet again.

He needed to call the building's superintendent and get all of that fixed once and for all. Will looked over at his bedside table, and Hannibal had brought his phone and left it there. Of course, he did. Will rolled his eyes and lifted the screen. Sixteen unread messages. Will chuckled, the itch momentarily gone, then swiped the phone to call Joe.

Joe was the type of guy that Will felt he'd known for ages, even upon first meeting him. Approaching his late sixties at the very least, the man already had a small hump in his high shoulders, head and neck sagging from the weight of life's chains. He wore old flannels with pearl snap buttons and always smelled like linseed Palmade, even though there were barely enough white hairs to cover half his scalp. The red handkerchief that hung from his back pocket served as nothing more than a catch-all for Joe's hacking, ash-smelling coughs that frequently interrupted his speech. That didn't stop Joe from talking, however. Not even a little. Joe didn't know a stranger. Joe could probably talk to the wall, and they'd be best buddies after an hour or two.

Will didn't mind. Joe had stories and no one to tell them to, so Will listened, sprinkling two or three '*that's interestings*' and '*what happened thens*' over the conversation, just to be polite. Honestly, Joe would have kept talking if Will had said absolutely nothing.

That particular day, Will had just made it down to the lobby when the entry door swung open, and Joe entered, scuffed metal toolbox in tow.

"Mr. Graham!" He said, raising an open hand. "How long you been out here?"

"I just got here, Joe," Will said, greeting the old man with a pat on the back as they walked to the broken elevator. Will didn't have to help Joe fix things, but he wanted to. It was comforting, like how he felt at the shipyard.

"The fellas at the shop was heckling me about the size bolt we needed." There was something about the way Joe spoke, the subtle undertone of a southern accent, that Will found both endearing and familiar.

"5/8ths, right?"

"Well, that's what I said—told 'em we checked. They bet me a ten spot I was wrong." Joe said, emptying the small plastic wrapper of golden bolts into Will's palm.

“No, Joe. That’s right. 5/8ths.” Will replied, holding the lug nut to the bolts on the elevator, the head sizes matching perfectly.

“Hell—looks that I’m owed some money.” Joe set down his metal toolbox and opened it, coughing loudly into his handkerchief as he bent over and retrieved the items he needed. “I don’t figure we’ll ever stop fixing this thing.” He grumbled.

“It’ll stop altogether soon enough,” Will said.

“They’ll replace it then, just you watch. They’ll let us spend hours revivin’ what they know’s already dead in the ground.”

Will climbed into the elevator carriage and pulled the large arm above the door, engaging the brake system, then released the door from the power supply. Joe handed him a ratchet, and Will began dismantling the golden lattice—the bane of his existence.

“Spect this thing is nearly a century old now,” Joe said.

“It’s never been replaced?” Will asked, curious if the elevator was as old as the building.

“*Nah*—they blew the budget fixing up the place to resell it after the city went dark. Guess they never got round to the elevator. Course, it wasn’t broke then. Didn’t have to worry.” Joe said as he climbed into the lift and started attending to the electrical board. “Then the first tenants moved in after they did up the place, and this thing's been breaking ever since.”

“That’s interesting,” Will replied, only half listening.

“They was a lot like you, I reckon. Actually knew one of em—just friendly passings—and he looked a bit like you. Said he and his boyfriend been together nearly 20 years. How long you been with yours?”

“We aren’t together.” Will sighed, continuing to wrench out bolts with aggression.

“Ah—I know it’s your business. But they were a nice couple. Always giving cookies at Christmas, that sort of thing. Never know why they did what they did. Papers explained it, but it never did sit right with me.”

Will stopped wrenching for a minute. “What?” He asked, now with a vested interest.

“The papers—“

“No,” Will interrupted, “what happened to the couple?”

“Oh. I figured you knew—that maybe Karlsson told you—ah well, anyhow, you's bound to find out sooner or later.” Joe coughed into this hanky three loud times, then wiped the edges of his mouth, returning the cloth to his pocket. “Princeton was the one's name that got all the publicity. Princeton is a great name for print—Princeton Murders will catch your eye—not Smith Murders or Jones Murders—ya know. Little too bland for the public's taste.”

Will continued his work, but slowly so he could catch every word Joe was saying.

“Anyhow—they been here, hell no more than three years, when the neighbors hear all sorts of commotion, Yellin, hollerin, carryin on. Neighbors called the cops, and they showed up, but not before a gun went off. Emptied the chamber of it too. When no one came to the door, they had to bust it open.” Joe coughed again, then started screwing the electrical board back onto the panel. “I’m sure they got an eyeful that night.”

“They were dead?”

“Princeton, his boyfriend, and two others—don’t remember how they were connected—all of 'em cut up and mangled, blood almost everywhere. Had to put down new flooring and fix the drywall. Anyhow—Princeton shot himself when it was all said and done and did a shoddy job of it too. Every single one of them died of blood loss—so said the coroner. Said Princeton was a surgeon.”

Will had stopped working at that point.

“All sorts of speculation came after that. So many rumors you couldn’t keep ’em straight. No family. No friends. Co-workers said they was all fine last they'd seen ’em, and that’s what I told the cops when they came round here. I told 'em Billy was the nicest guy I ever knew—quiet tenants that kept everything nice.”

“Billy?”

“That was the one I knew. Then I knew the Princeton guy, but I’ll never remember his first name. You’d think I’d never forget something like that. Building was owned by a guy named Bower back then, and he said that Princeton was one of those repeat killers, had a meat locker on the west side he kept the bodies in. But Bower was a talker—liked to gossip. Papers never said anything about that.”

“What do you think happened, Joe?” Will asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Well, like I said, I didn’t know them from adam, but I know *it's always the quiet ones*. It’s easy for a name like Princeton to sound evil, but sometimes I wonder if it wasn’t Billy playing everyone, right up to the end.”

Will had to collect himself for a moment, his thoughts overloading every circuit in his brain.

He needed to seal this up. He needed to fix all these rickety things. He needed to stop the itch, the insatiable itch, the red welt right above his heart. Will suddenly wanted to peel his face off, peel his skin off, burn the flesh along with all brindles that scratched him.

He thought about the voices and how they had vanished in Hannibal's presence. *Billy Boy. Psychopath*. His skin peeling from his body. He thought about how no location seemed to help the rash, and how sleeping in Hannibal's bed only made it worse. He thought about this whole life they were constructing together and how sometimes it seemed ridiculous—an absolutely horrible idea.

Then the thought occurred to him.

Maybe it was Hannibal making him itch.

Will then turned his mind to the phone in his pocket, the incessant messages that continued to light up its screen, and how looking at them made the itching cease, even if it was only temporary relief.

It became a simple decision.

Will would go out with Cooper Kennedy because Cooper Kennedy didn't make him itch. Because Cooper Kennedy wouldn't shoot them all in a bloodthirsty rage. Because Cooper Kennedy was nice. Cooper Kennedy didn't think about slaughtering and eating people. Cooper Kennedy didn't keep a Rolodex. Cooper Kennedy flirted over flowers, wore silk shirts, and no socks with his loafers. That guy would be the guy Will would try.

As he headed back upstairs after Joe left, Will compared the two headlines in his head.

The Lecter Murders—The Kennedy Murders

And for some reason, they both sounded the same.

A FOUR LETTER WORD

1.

The obsession grew slowly like an insidious weed.

Will would never pinpoint *exactly* when it started, but eventually, he would notice how Hannibal's body sent him into a downward spiral of unparalleled interest. Maybe it was innocent at first, but as time slipped by, it became impossible for him to cover his seemingly strange actions.

The nights he now spent in Hannibal's bed were small explorations past old boundaries. Often enough, there was no stopping his hands, feet, and lips as they went about the task of learning every intricacy of tawny flesh that housed that mysterious soul.

It started, so far as Will knew—even though, in truth, it started long before that—with Hannibal's sweaty neck as he tried to unlock their apartment complex door for the first time, this side of four months ago. Back then, he wondered if the flesh tasted like under the beading, glistening sweat. He remembered wanting to lap it up in a long stroke of his tongue and swallow the salt and sweetness down into his stomach.

Make it a part of him.

Since then, the desire had only amplified in intensity, turning up the volume on every other aspect of Hannibal's body.

Each night they spent together only compounded the burning weight that sat like a lump of hot coal in the pit of his stomach. It was only an added burn that they were now physically closer than ever before.

After their last shared bed experience—the night the voices came—things changed. Will now slept in the crook of Hannibal's arm, barely moving an inch throughout his sleep—the new approved position by both parties while occupying the same bed.

It kept Will from wandering around the house—monitored him in a mild-mannered way—and Will told himself this was the only reason. He told himself that neither of them were in it for the physical connection of intimacy or how electrifying each touch was, a tiny vibrating lull connected through time and space.

He certainly wasn't there because grazes could easily look like an accident. He never once took the teardrop of his inner thigh up Hannibal's leg, searching gently to find the log that lived there. It was big, even in its restful state. Will loved it. In the middle of sleep, it was so easy to take his hand and gently grab the soft length and absorb the low hum that came from Hannibal's throat. Will would elicit the vibrating moan and think about the shiver it would send up his hard cock if Hannibal's lips were firmly suctioned around it.

Let him suck on you

Laying together was so simple, and that space was one where the most salacious obsessions were curated. Will would move in the most innocuous ways, slight and timid, exploring only what his face and hands could reach.

The hair was the first.

Will loved Hannibal's chest hair. The way it laid in soft piling curls, a cushion of semi-coarseness, spattered with silver strands that pressed to his cheek. Sometimes Will would shave extra close just to increase the sensation of the hair against his face. The scrapes it made against his cheek felt like heaven—smelled like heaven.

A week ago now, he'd taken a lock of that beautiful hair and tied it with thread, keeping it in his pocket. At work, he'd brush his fingertips across the filaments. He would retract his fingers and smell them, almost dying inside the high it gave him.

And that was only half of it.

The very same type of hair grew in a thick field through the flesh of Hannibal's armpit. Spirally and twisted together like a menagerie of tendrils, containing the majestic sweet musk of Hannibal's sweat and odor. Sometimes, Will would lean his nose as far into the crook as he subtly could and inhale deeply, bottling up his innate desire to lick the forested valley with anticipation of how hard he would get.

Hannibal's unwashed body was intoxicating.

Will wanted to run my nose along Hannibal's inner thigh, not touching, just smelling. Up his side, under his arms, to his neck. Every inch where a new smell lurked, each similar yet vastly different from the last. He wanted those smells to stamp a seal over the moment, a permanent memory, each time he caught the whiff of something similar, he would come back to this body, natural in its state, pure and raw, exhaling through each pore like a secret.

Then there was the Verger scar.

When Hannibal would roll over, what very few times that was, his back would undulate under the dynamic light, and Will saw the reflective circular brand that lived there. It was sublime—in its own way.

Will had so many scars on his body, ones given to him, brands of his own kind—*property of Hannibal Lecter* as the insignia.

Will felt some bitter rage, some maniacal pleasure, in seeing that brand on Hannibal's back, which the man acquired because of his foolish relinquishment to get back to Will. In many ways, that was Will's brand, something he put there, and Will relished that fact.

Property of Will Graham—something Hannibal would never be rid of.

Will enjoyed the ownership, and now, in the face of his new self-enlightenment, he enjoyed seeing how far he could push before Hannibal finally cracked. There was something about

how Hannibal could take his life at any moment, something salacious, that aroused him. Will couldn't contend with it and conceded to refrain from fighting it.

They would sleep together, waking early, and Will couldn't honestly say how long they would lay there. Sometimes it felt like an unending game of chicken—who would be first to break the bliss. Whenever Hannibal would rustle, Will would shut his eyes and feign sleep. After a while, he figured Hannibal was doing the same, unable to corrupt whatever seconds they had left.

That particular morning in October, however, it was finally Hannibal's hand that did it. The soft blades, the meaty pads, the tender palm made two large sweeping C's across Will's side and back, and Hannibal must have seen his mistake because he froze immediately after.

But Will couldn't stay there all day, not with everything he was feeling. So, he nuzzled his cheek against the chest hairs and shattered the fragile silence.

"Morning."

No greeting attended the low rumble that exited Hannibal's broad chest, releasing into the air.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Thank you." Will said, rolling to his back, wiping the sleep from the corners of his eyes.

Hannibal assertively pulled Will back into his chest with a swift and forceful curl. Will didn't have time to protest or think too hard. He was more surprised by the action itself and the ease at which Hannibal could move his body. He both liked and didn't like the fact that Hannibal was now moving him wherever and whenever he wanted to.

He could kill you

"Stay," Hannibal whispered.

As Will's cheek replanted to the stone pectoral, he didn't know what compelled him to—perhaps the fun, rebellious nature that now bloomed inside him—but he opened his mouth, enveloped Hannibal's exposed nipple, and dragged the tip of his tongue over the erect flesh.

He heard Hannibal gasp softly, almost inaudible.

Will shifted his eyes up to the older man to see his head tossed back in ecstasy.

A glorious sight.

Will blinked his dark eyelashes, watching Hannibal contain his desire to writhe, then planted his lips firmly around the dimpled skin and sucked. Hannibal lifted the pliable arch of his back, mouth open, and Will slowly shifted his leg to pin down the laying man. He rutted against Hannibal's thigh, pressing his semi-hard cock firmly against the leg as he continued to suck and lick, taking in the taste as if it were feeding a monster inside him.

Will's chest itched, burned, seared. God, the pain was powerful, long black claws scraping against the inside of his torso, begging to get out. Then, in an ever opposing parallel of the man he was only a second ago, he took his teeth and bit down—hard.

"Ah," Hannibal groaned, tucking his chin to his chest, grabbing Will's face between his thumb and forefinger. Their eyes met briefly, then Will resumed his task.

Strong fingers laced through the chocolate strands of hair, forcing Will's head to remain in position, tongue lapping, teeth nibbling, pressing firm the cock that was now insatiably hard. Will brought his inner thigh up between Hannibal's legs to the now rock-hard shaft he craved so deeply and was it…wet?

Will wanted nothing more than to find out. He sent a flat hand across Hannibal's stuttering stomach, strands of coarse hairs filling between the webbing, tickling gently. His pinky inserted itself beneath the brim of Hannibal's pants.

Tempt him. Let him control you.

Hannibal released Will's hair and sent a hand down Will's bare back, grabbing Will's plump peach in a firm handful. Will's entire body moved under the cupping force, and it felt *so* good. His teeth yanked at the reddening nipple as his body was taken, sending his fingers father down Hannibal's pants, feeling the warm pubes against his skin.

Fuck. He wanted to eat them.

Hannibal took his hand, brought his index finger to his mouth, wet it generously, then slid it down Will's pants, between the round cheeks, inserting firmly into a tight virgin hole just past the nail bed.

"Ah!" Will moaned into Hannibal's chest, forehead colliding with collar bone.

"Easy," Hannibal whispered, "Come here."

Will looked up at him again, eyes bright and full of the morning sun, pupils wide like black holes. He shifted up, closer to Hannibal's face, looking into the garnet, listening intently.

Let him control you.

With better reach, Hannibal sent his stern finger past the knuckle into Will's entrance, dry and harsh as its friction forced the rippling edges to pucker.

"Ah—Hannibal," Will moaned in a whisper, not breaking eye contact. "I can't."

"You can," Hannibal reassured, eyes stern, his hot breath hovering over Will's wet and swollen lips. "Is this how he's going to touch you?"

Unease lurched through Will's body, a sweaty spike of anxiety, thinking of anyone else touching him this way. "I—I don't know." He said, raising his chin as Hannibal teased his sensitive hole.

“Is this how you *want* him to touch you?” Hannibal asked, dragging his nose across the curved angles of Will’s jaw.

Will’s exhale stuttered as he meekly nodded his head, the finger filling him, stretching him. “Yes.” The three letters falling out in a moan.

“I’ve been inside you, Will.” Hannibal’s voice was gruff, dark, and intimate as he took his other hand, filling with a mound of Will’s ass and spreading him further. Will’s body shifted, cock seeping inside his thin cotton joggers.

Will reached down and pulled his cock out past the brim, letting the hot skin rub against Hannibal’s thigh. “And that means something?” He said, rolling his hips, tightening over Hannibal’s finger, flat palm pressing into Hannibal’s hairy chest.

Hannibal growled, pulling his finger out and grabbing Will’s hips, yanking the boy with ease to straddle him. “It means I own you.”

Will sat up with pride. He looked down, smug through hooded lids, his cock held up over the elastic rim of his pants, tapping his belly in slick. Will took it in hand, the other hand pressing down into Hannibal’s belly. “That’s not what it means,” Will said, shaking his head, a few soft curls falling from place. He stroked his dry cock, twice, agonizingly slow.

Hannibal watched, clenching his hips up, tongue running over his dry bottom lip. His garnet eyes glistened as they met Will’s once again.

“Naughty boy.”

Will squeezed his legs, fastened around Hannibal’s torso, holding onto the small bucking thrust as it took him up and down. “Is that what I am?” Will said with a sly smile, rolling his hips again, grinding against the length that hardened beneath his subtle movements. “Wonder if my date will think so.”

And there it was. The push that burst through the crack.

Will’s mouth opened into a wide smile as Hannibal picked him up, throwing him to his stomach and crawling over his back.

“He can touch you—but he can not have you,” Hannibal growled into Will’s ear, Will’s shoulders tightening at the rush. Hannibal’s teeth grazed the connective tissue between neck and shoulder.

Will’s head tilted back, overwhelmed. “Bite me.” He said, not knowing where the words came from.

Hannibal pushed his groin into Will’s ass, giving him more weight from his heavy body. “Ask nicely.” He said, taking a possessive hand and pinning Will’s wrist to the bed.

Will smiled. “Please.” He whispered.

Hannibal took his sharp fangs and sank into Will’s flesh.

“Ah!” Will moaned.

Hannibal didn’t relinquish as Will’s body undulated under the pain. He drew blood, marked what was his, and told others that this one was taken. Whoever this ‘date’ was would have to look at Hannibal’s rose-colored imprint.

When Hannibal released, he dragged his thumb through the rising beads of blood, then brought it to Will’s blush mouth, staining the lips with crimson sin.

Will licked softly, the remnants staying like lipstick. “So that’s what I taste like.” He smirked.

Again, he pushed Hannibal past the breaking point. The large man yanked the soft cotton joggers from Will’s legs.

Hannibal spread him open, pulling the milky cheeks apart, fingers sinking into flesh like butter. “Do you remember this?” He said, then his thick pink tongue pressed to the winking hole, tight and rippled.

Remember this? Remember what?—Will thought

No, Will didn’t *remember* anything. They hadn’t done this before—*right*? Anyway, it didn’t matter. Will pushed the thoughts out and shifted his hips back slightly into Hannibal’s face.

but Will wasn’t ready for the sensation like he thought he was. He lurched forward on his elbows as Hannibal’s tongue entered him, mouth open, eyes fluttering closed. “Ah—easy, Hannibal.” He said, reaching back for a handful of silver hair, grabbing tightly. But Hannibal didn’t let up. His nose burrowed into Will’s crease, grazing coarse hair, tongue following behind, the saliva slicking him in heat followed by a chill. Will’s cock bounced just barely in the small gap of cold air, and Will reached down to stroke again.

If he sat all the way back, would Hannibal put that large cock inside him—wet in all its glory? And, as always, Will begged a temptation. He started to shift back when—

—the phone rang.

Both men perked up from their comfortable positions, taken out of the moment by the annoying vibrating jangle. They looked at each other and simultaneously launched for the mobile.

Hannibal grabbed the back of Will’s neck, and Will elbowed Hannibal’s chest.

Hannibal yanked at Will’s torso, but Will pressed both hands into Hannibal’s face, pushing him down, and reached the phone first.

They looked at each other as the phone continued to ring in Will’s hand.

Will smirked.

“Will,” Hannibal said authoritatively through furrowed brow. “Don’t answer it.”

But Will slid his thumb across the screen.

“Hello?”

“*Hello, Will Graham.*” Cooper’s voice threaded through the receiver.

“Hang on a minute,” Will said and left the room.

It didn’t matter the interruption, really. He had to get to work anyway. At least—that’s what Will told himself. He finalized the date with Cooper Kennedy, which took only a couple of minutes. When he hung up the phone, he looked down at the reflective screen, feeling the intense split in his personality.

Who are you?

“Leave me alone.” He announced to his empty bedroom.

The voices would never stop.

Will walked back down the hall, knowing full and well that the moment was over but unable to stop himself from the obsessive tendency to be in Hannibal’s presence at any given moment. When he made it through the open door, the bathroom was already closed and locked, the shower beating down in a rainfall.

Fuck. Fuck you. Fuck them. Fuck me. Fuck Cooper Kennedy.

Was this regret? Shame? Longing? Love?

Don’t think. Just act.

Will pressed his back to the closed bathroom door, listening intently as he heard small, subtle grunts echo into the space behind it.

Hannibal was jerking off.

Will looked down at his naked body, feeling his balls tingle and ache, thinking about the smell, the hair, the firm hands, the possessive maneuvering. He stroked like it was his job. He pulled cum from his body, enjoying every thought, until he emptied into his cupped palm, erecting a hard wall against the flood of thoughts he knew were about to race forward.

Dontthinkdontthinkdontthink

This obsession had to end soon. It had to. Will couldn’t keep doing this. Allowing the fantasy while blocking the reality. He couldn’t keep enjoying these thoughts while actively hating the man that elicited them. But each day became more of a challenge. Will started wondering things—things he had honestly never thought of before. There were piles upon piles of unasked questions, all starting relatively simply and, from there, descending into chaos.

The longer it went on, the more he craved. This had to be something Hannibal was doing to him. It could in no way be linked to some actual desire.

2.

"Ok, so this is a no?"

Will smoothed down the front of his shirt, turning slightly as he looked in the mirror, then presented himself to Beverly, who lay on his made bed, perched on her elbow, flipping through a magazine that was—oddly enough—a Home & Garden.

"Let me see," Beverly said, looking up from her reading, completely unsurprised when the man put on a red flannel. "Doc. No. You look like you're going to work."

Will blew a sigh through his lower lip, practically ripping the buttons from holes and throwing the shirt off his body.

"Will, seriously. Just do the blue one." Bev said nonchalantly.

"I always wear blue."

"That's because it looks good." She replied, jutting her chin a few times for emphasis.

Will picked up the cobalt shirt he had tossed on the bed during the last outfit switch. His elbows shook slightly as he put it on, the nervous tremors of excitement and fear.

"What are you doing?" Bev asked, rather curt.

"What do you mean what am I doing?" Will asked, worried that she had noticed his shaking.

"Your shirt."

"Bev-er-ly," He said, drawing out the syllables, pressing her to get to the point.

"It's buttoned up." She said, waving a hand in his direction.

"I always button my shirt."

Beverly sent Will a very knowing look from under her brow. "Will Graham. If there is one thing you have *NEVER* done, it's button your final buttons. You don't even zip your coveralls up all the way. It's a cleavage thing with you." She finished, flipping another page in a snap.

"So—what are you saying?" He asked, holding a shoulder shrug.

"UNBUTTON THE BUTTONS!" She announced in a terse statement.

Will smiled at her and unclasped one, two, three buttons, then looked at himself in the mirror.

This date with Cooper Kennedy was broaching the unknown. Will didn't know what he was doing—what game he was about to start. It had all the signs of stupidity, horrid and fun. But he couldn't help all the dreadful questions that marked him, just like the bite on his shoulder.

"Bev." He said, looking in the mirror once more.

"Huh?" She responded in a quick, high-pitched grunt, flipping another page in her magazine.

Will waited a minute to ask. He wasn't sure if he wanted to ask. The words were an admittance of his true feelings and thoughts—admitting an insecurity. He was apprehensive about sharing with Beverly his second thoughts, seeing as how she was so vehemently in favor of this date. It was hard swallowing the apprehension and letting the intention come forth in all its purity, but he managed—if only just.

"Is this a mistake?" He asked quietly.

Beverly looked up from her previous focus, confusion and disbelief twisting her face into a question. "A mistake? Doc, it's a date."

"Maybe I shouldn't do this. I could still make an excuse." He said offhandedly.

Beverly closed her magazine, her tongue swashing over her bottom lip that she bit and then spat out with a small pop. Will knew what that was. She always did that when she was digging through the pile of shit Will had to block something real, and as always, she used a big shovel.

"What's wrong, Will?" She asked, throwing the magazine to the dresser.

"Nothing. Just nerves, I guess."

"This isn't just nerves." She pushed herself up off her side and crossed her legs. "Tell me what's wrong."

Will walked over to the door and shut it lightly.

It wasn't the newness, the fact that this was his first date with a man or the fact that this man was a wealthy, successful lawyer. It was the fact that he was still unsure about committing to this action because he had Hannibal on a constant loop in his mind.

The lock of hair was in his pocket. He knew he would thumb it several times during the night. He knew their morning together. He knew how much he enjoyed it. He knew how undeniable all of these things were. What hoops would he have to jump through after this was done? Would it mean the end of everything? Would Hannibal stay to fight the good fight?

You'll regret this.

The voices were louder than ever. Will whistled as he searched for a jacket to wear.

“Will?” Beverly asked, yanking Will from his thoughts. “Are you ok?”

“Uh,” he jostled his head, “Yeah, I just lost my train of thought.”

It was clear that Beverly did not believe that in the slightest.

“Why do you want to cancel?”

“I don’t know." Will replied, "I don’t—I’m probably just nervous.”

“Will—does this have something to do with Hannibal?”

Oh, fuck all. She was too good at this. Yes, of course, it did. But Will had to deny it. How was he to tell her anything? ‘*Yeah. I want to be around my roommate all the time? I’m obsessed with him? His hair? His smell? The way he handles me? I want to cut out pieces of him and keep them in jars around my room so I can look at them forever?'* No.

“No, Bev,” He chuckled in a very convincing brush-off.

“Then you’ve got a bad feeling about Cooper?” She probed.

Will plopped down on the bed, and Beverly came over, curling around Will and laying her head in his lap. She was so sincere. It was hard to deny her the truth. Her beautiful face, the scar on her cheek like lightning, the way every expression told Will that she would not judge him, even in his most heinous moments.

“Look at me, Doc.” She said calmly, respectfully not touching his face. “Just hint at what’s happening, then maybe I can help.”

He sighed, giving a fraction of what he really felt. “Generally, I’m good at reading people. Lately, I can’t seem to see anything straight—except for these wild urges.”

“What kind of urges?” She asked.

“You know—what people normally *urge* about.”

She heard it, but not *entirely*.

“Listen, urges are normal. You’ve suppressed a lot of them for a long time. Now you’re just letting them out. That’s ok. You don’t have to feel guilty every time something surprising happens.”

“Yeah,” Will huffed out as he ran his hand over his face.

“But as far as your date tonight, if it doesn’t feel right—or you can’t tell if it does or doesn’t, then don’t do it.”

That reassurance was enough for Will; something about being able to say no if he wanted to made him confident in his decision.

“So—blue?” He asked, deflecting to the superficial topic of his shirt.

“If you aren’t sure about the shirt,” Bev said, rolling herself off Will’s lap, then rushing to the door, “then you should ask—Hannibal!” She yelled as she swung the door open.

“Beverly.” He said, throwing his head back in exasperation.

“He’s the man to ask. He dresses way better than you.” Bev said, standing on the door ledge and gesturing her head out.

Will meekly walked out, not really wanting to do this, but doing it anyway. That seemed to be his life right now. He went to stand just outside the living room doorway, inside which Hannibal sat, book in hand, bare feet propped on the ottoman, as always.

“Well—“ Bev said, following behind, “he doesn’t think the blue is a good choice. What do you think, Hannibal?”

“I always wear blue,” Will said, ignoring—well—everything

“I told him—“ Bev started.

“No.” Hannibal interrupted with assertion, calming the two flustered individuals in the doorway. His maroon eyes met Will’s with sincerity. “You’re perfect.” He stated clearly, the words sounding like silver bells.

Will blinked softly. It was the most straightforward compliment Hannibal had ever paid him.

“See? You look great.” Beverly said, entering the foyer and collecting her things.” Alright—I’m gonna go. And you should go soon too if you’re going to make it to Glenareid’s by 8:00.”

“Beverly.” Will shot at her with wide eyes.

Beverly bore her teeth in a grimace, having forgotten Will didn’t want Hannibal to know anything about his date. She stomped her heels into her shoes, kissed Will on the cheek, mouth SORRY as she did.

“Call me after, which hopefully is *tomorrow*.” She finished, tongue sticking out from her smile as Will shut the door on her.

Will walked back into the living room, withdrawing his phone and tossing it to the coffee table, then tucked his knee as he plopped down on the couch.

“Sorry about that.” Will offered Hannibal, even though he knew the man didn’t want it.

“Not at all,” Hannibal replied, continuing his reading.

That was all Hannibal was going to say, of course. He wasn't going to offer anything that might alternatively be construed as encouragement. He would also not help Will calm his anxiety with an ongoing conversation at a beat and rhythm Will liked.

No, Will knew he was on his own with this one.

Will's phone illuminated on the coffee table. He eyed the ground close to Hannibal, trying to witness the man's expression through his periphery. Hannibal, of course, made no expression, only lifting his eyes to look briefly and then returning to his page. Will leaned forward, grabbed the phone, reading the message.

[Your chariot awaits, Will Graham]

Will stood up, unaware of the smile he let crease his face.

"Are you off, then?" Hannibal asked.

"Yeah," Will said, heading for the coat rack.

"Will you be late?"

Will dawned his coat, zipping it quickly. "I—don't know."

"Will you be downtown?"

"Glenaried's—*Hannibal*—I know you heard." Will knew what Hannibal wanted to ask but wasn't asking.

Hannibal wanted to know if drinks were happening before or after, if Glenaried's was closer to this man's home, if Will were to end up drunk, say, where would he be staying.

Will knew Hannibal was probably already tracking the phone; all the messages knew he had probably listened to every conversation. There was a high likelihood that the man would follow him on this date and that his date would end up dead afterward. But out of all these things that were making Will increasingly annoyed just as he thought about them, he approached the door, and Hannibal said something unexpected.

"Will."

"Yeah?"

"*Be careful*."

It didn't sound like a blessing nor a reprimand. It sounded like honest words. Will stopped and met Hannibal's gaze.

"*I promise*."

Steady your hands before you begin.

Hannibal watched from the second-floor landing. He exited through the stair entrance quietly because he needed to see *this man's* face, needed to ascertain the level at which *this man* was about to approach his boy.

Will's date was a large man—to be fair—much larger than Hannibal, which was disconcerting. *The man* waited in the lobby, hands behind his back. This October in Brooklyn was colder than normal, so the tall man wore a calf-length wool coat.

The man was distinguished, yes, but more importantly, he had the financial stability to purchase an elegant wool coat, possibly a Gucci or Burberry, or some other prosaic designer. Hannibal was familiar with the cut. It was mass-generated among the Manhattan elite.

As Will exited the lift, walking somewhat cautiously, *the man* withdrew his hands, presenting a rather large bouquet of peach snapdragons.

Orifice-shaped flowers. Typical.

If he had a gun, Hannibal would have shot *the man* right then and there. Speaking of which, he should acquire a gun fairly soon.

Will took the flowers, bashful and utterly unaware of how to receive such a gesture. How completely inconsiderate. Hannibal didn't know *this man*, but *this man* was not thinking of Will—at all. Will needed tapering, slow steps, small things.

Yet Will seemed to enjoy it.

"You shaved." Hannibal heard Will say with what seemed like pleasure.

"I did," Cooper said, running his hand over his cleft chin.

"I like it."

That statement was a complete falsehood, and Hannibal knew it.

They didn't touch each other. That was reassuring. But *this man* was pulling out all the stops. Shaving. Flowers. Opening doors. Hiring cars. Glenareid's—a tight fit for even the most extravagant budget.

Cliche, but the least of what Will deserved.

Steady your hands before you being.

Hannibal did not go to bed that night.

He could have gone to his room, sat in his chair, and read there, but circumstances being what they were, he refused. The living room had a direct and open view of the front entry.

He had attempted to read the opening paragraph of his book approximately four times. The fifth time, he made it so far as the second paragraph before going back and re-reading a sentence. His eyes were doing nothing more than following small black horizontal lines as they were programmed to do so, but behind them, his thoughts floated up into the air, bouncing across the ceiling, trying to escape like wasps trapped in a window.

He closed his book and exchanged it for his iPad and phone on the side table. He typed in the passcode for both, and *the investigation began*.

Glenaried's closed at 12:00 AM. The reservation was for 8:00 PM, and according to an accommodating young host—who divulged information without apprehension—Hannibal knew that two men, Will and *his date*, had finished their meal just before 10:00 PM and left on foot. There were eight bars within reasonable walking distance to Glenaried's. Two that hosted live music, one sports bar, three nightclubs, one hotel bar, and one curated cocktail lounge.

It was easy to predict where Will might prefer, but Hannibal had no knowledge of *Will's date* nor his preferences for post-meal drinks. However, thanks to Glenaried's severe lack of staff training, the young host had been more than happy to supply Hannibal with a last name on the reservation.

Kennedy.

That spurred an altogether new search.

There were two male Kennedys in the Manhattan area within a relatively similar age range to Will, that were single and who had status enough to retain a car service. One was a defense lawyer from the Upper East Side. The other was a stockbroker who lived in Connecticut.

Surely, Will had enough sense to stay away from a lawyer, but Hannibal wasn't about to exclude that as a possibility. When he called the eight—yes, all eight—watering holes, he dropped the name Kennedy, and it wasn't until he reached the cocktail lounge that the name rang a bell with one of the staff.

"Oh, Coop? Who wants to know?"

Well—Hannibal was wrong. Will did not have sense enough to stay away from a lawyer.

Cooper Kennedy was a highly publicized defense lawyer with a penchant for getting men off the hook for killing their wives—*allegedly*. His most recent case, which was won in court, helped Trevor Speck, who was charged with three counts of murder in the first for killing his

wife and two infant daughters, walk *scot-free*. His firm was now officially representing a New York Governor and two state senators.

Mr. Cooper Kennedy was now on a date with Will Graham, plying him with handcrafted cocktails at *Portosa Port + Wine*. What topics of conversation would they explore as Will's body loosened with each double whisky neat? How long would they sit there and drink? Portosa was open all night, but it was less than 10 blocks from the Upper East Side. Mr. Kennedy certainly had a luxurious apartment, dressed to the nines in typical bachelor decor, lots of black leather, and plenty of flat surfaces to fuck on.

Would Will go home with this man? Will had a history for '*hit it and quit it.*' But Will had never been with a man before—at least—*so far as Will was willing to admit*. Would he choose Mr. Kennedy to usher him into that new experience? Someone he didn't know at all? Surely not. Surely, Will had enough sense to know he needed someone with experience and patience, who would take things slow, open him with caution, who knew how and where to touch at precisely the right time, who knew the secret desires and would press them with agonizingly gentle force.

Mr. Kennedy was potentially a good fuck, but did Mr. Kennedy want to eat Will's cum? Did he want to warm his cock for hours, if only to orgasm off smelling the sweetness of Will's sex? Did he want to lick the subtle curve of Will's back when it glistened with small beads of sweat?

Hannibal doubted it.

Unfortunately, Hannibal was wrong—*again*. The unpredictable Will Graham.

At exactly 2:04 AM, the rattling elevator approached the front door. The keys fumbled in the lock while hushed voices pressed against the wall, and in a loud stumble, two men fell into the foyer, the large one containing the small one, lips interlocked like suckerfish.

Unaware that they were not alone, both men crashed into the wall, then the other wall, then landed on the archway leading to the living room, at which point Will was drawn out from his wrestling match, finally opening his eyes to realize the world still existed, and there weren't just two drunk men occupying the space.

"Uh—*Hannibal*," Will said, pushing Cooper off him slightly, who was still pinning him to the wall. "You're—still up."

"As are you," Hannibal replied, sending his gaze like a darting arrow into Will as the larger man continued to caress him—if that's what you wanted to call it.

Hannibal maintained his stoic composure.

It was, indeed, possible for these two men to separate. Contrary to their newfound belief system, they were not surgically attached to each other, and they could stand apart, even if only for five seconds to make introductions.

However—this fact was apparently, beyond their reasonable comprehension, and they continued to stand in half groping state while Will did his best to abate whatever awkward sensation he was having.

“This—this is Cooper.” He said, pointing up to the man wrapped around him like it wasn’t obvious who he was talking about. “Cooper Kennedy, this is Hannibal Lecter.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Cooper said, releasing Will, but just barely, extending his hand to Hannibal.

“Pleasures all mine.” Hannibal shook his hand without standing.

“It’s a nice place you’ve got. Retro.” Cooper said. “So your bedroom is this way?” He said, tugging at Will and gesturing toward his end of the hall.

“We will try not to disturb you,” Will said to Hannibal as Cooper pressed his nose to Will’s ear, wrapping his arms around the younger man.

“No promises, though!” Cooper yelled back, picking Will up, his feet fully leaving the ground as they walked down the hall.

“Cooper—no!” Will said like he was instructing a dog he couldn’t really yell at, then laughing far too loud that immediately silenced when the bedroom door slammed shut.

What.in.gods.name.was.happening?

Will was definitely trying to keep his promise of staying quiet. Cooper Kennedy definitely was not.

“Let’s take this fucker off, shall we?”

“Will—you’re hot as fuck.”

“You like to be called Will? Or William? Just so I know what to yell out when I cum inside you.”
"You aren’t coming inside me.”
“Well—then, do you have a condom, Will Graham? A large one?”

“Ah—fuckin shit—Will. That’s fucking good.”

“There you go, baby—fuuuck.”

Hannibal wondered who exactly *'baby'* was and where exactly this man got an education since the word *'fuck*' seemed to be so freely expressed as the main noun, verb, and adjective, sometimes all in the same sentence.

Will did not belong to this man, whoever the *fuck* he was. Will had been gone for less than five hours, and now he had a man calling him baby, touching him in areas Hannibal had already rightfully claimed.

What kind of game was this?

At that time, Hannibal heard his internal monologue over the word that was pounding through the door down the hall. Every time Cooper Kennedy said *'fuck'* Hannibal heard *'kill.'*

5.

Will walked into the kitchen with a limp, which was disconcerting. Hannibal had to wonder if Cooper Kennedy had penetrated him, given Will's disposition.

“Good morning,” Hannibal said, peeking over his shoulder as Will walked in.

“Hey, you,” Will replied with a half-smile.

Hannibal waited a moment, fully aware that Mr. Kennedy had left shortly after their little tryst but still ensuring the man wasn’t about to walk in just in case he was mistaken.

“Where is your new friend?”

“He left,” Will said, blinking far more than usual as he started filling the Moka pot.

Hannibal stopped what he was doing, reaching over to push a few curls behind Will’s ear. But Will didn’t look over.

“Will,” Hannibal said sternly. Will still didn’t look over. “What happened?” Hannibal finished, much more tender than before.

“Nothing,” Will said, gently batting away Hannibal’s hand.

Will continued his regular movements about the kitchen, but this time, as he walked behind Hannibal to move him out of the way, he paused. Hannibal felt the young man’s forehead first, then his cheek, then two warm arms wrapping around Hannibal’s waist with tight conviction. Will hugged Hannibal like he never had, tight and submissive, uncaring about any repercussion or implication of the action. At that moment, Hannibal felt Will latch to him with need, yearning for protection.

That was all Hannibal needed to understand that something was terribly wrong.

RED HANDED

Chapter Notes

This chapter picks up where the last one left off. We are in the kitchen and Will is hugged tightly to Hannibal's back the morning after his date with Cooper.

1.

In light of the current situation, the dosing had to continue. Hannibal had increased the amount to 12mcg, and as predicted, the night disturbances increased, but their physical distance shrank. Will's reliance on Hannibal was increasing tenfold, and this reliance had brought with it an innate desire for physical intimacy in the broadest sense of the word.

Will was now almost entirely driven by his need, past the point of any inhibition. His calloused hands groped shamelessly in the night. The younger man had taken a lock of Hannibal's chest hair, an item he kept with him at all times. Often, the mornings they laid together bled into Will's work hours, and Will was becoming less and less bothered by the prospect of late arrivals to work.

Hannibal became hopeful that Will would cease his commitment to continued employment altogether, allowing Hannibal to support him financially.

Everything was going according to plan.

That was, of course, except for Cooper Kennedy.

The drop of all reservations was perfect for the happenings inside that apartment. Outside of the apartment, however, it was now starting to backfire. Will was following every impulse without care for the consequences—testing the limits of Hannibal's patience—happily falling into situations that would surely lead to violence.

What Hannibal was trying to ascertain now was why Will was doing pushing in such a fashion. There had to be another component to this, apart from Will's recently high libido and penchant for sass.

Will was purposefully acting defiant. He was poking the bear and stepping back to watch.

Is that what this was?—Hannibal wondered.

Did Will want to see the monster again? Hannibal in his purest form? Was this all an attempt to draw out the killer, hoping that Hannibal would pounce? Was this his way of asking to join

in, cleverly telling Hannibal that he was ready for the hunt, the game, the kill? Was Will developing some unnamed fetish for Hannibal's monstrous side?

It was a distinct possibility that all of those things were true. Among the various plausible outcomes of Hannibal's mind-opening experiments, this was the least expected, but also, the most highly coveted. If Will were using this new unencumbered terrain to seek out Hannibal, then things could not be better. They would eventually find each other and unify as Hannibal intended.

However, there was one other possibility. One that weighed heavily on Hannibal's mind.

Will could, in fact, be falling for another man.

Hannibal had to determine which of these were the actual truth of events without letting onto his plan or the resulting actions that followed each determinate option. That would require tact, skill, and—Hannibal's least favorite—patience.

As Will hugged him that morning, face plastered to Hannibal's back post flagrant coitus, Hannibal seethed.

Will stunk. He smelled of his old life, coated in the fragrance of semblance—a forgery. Will had tucked his true self back into the far corner of his being, and Hannibal would have to work hard, once again, to dig him out.

Will released from the embrace. Hannibal turned and handed him the small eight-ounce glass of juice—the first attempt to draw him out.

"Thank you," Will said, still completely unaware of the transparent weight that laced the beverage. He swallowed it in two gulps.

Hannibal took the empty glass, freckled with abandoned pulp, and set it in the sink.

Will sat down at his breakfast seat, Hannibal's beautifully prepared meal awaiting him, but did nothing but lean back and cross his arms. His eyes cast out through the large vertical casement windows, glancing once toward the fire escape. He licked his lips, the previous night weighing heavy on his thoughts, tempting him with nicotine cravings to loosen the firm grip anxiety had on his mind.

"Stay here for a moment," Hannibal said, sitting down to his plate, preventing Will from running out to a cigarette. He was trying to maintain the moment of conflict, hoping that if it festered long enough, Will would speak to it.

Hannibal couldn't stand the thoughts that rose as he looked across Will's body—from the curly hair, dislodged, thinking about Mr. Kennedy's hands tugging it too hard, smelling it too deeply. He wondered what Mr. Kennedy's kiss was like, if it was forceful or tender. He could see the large, invisible handprints on Will's shoulders, waist, back, legs, the cock that was so delicious and sweet, pink and bulged when erect. He couldn't help the heat that boiled just under his shoulders as he imagined Cooper Kennedy's invasive tongue lapping at it. Where had Will's cum gone? Had Will gotten off at all?

“Do you want to discuss last night?” Hannibal started, hoping to sound simple in the application of his words.

Will sighed, staring at his plate of sourdough and sausage. He chuckled briefly, almost inaudible. “I tripped pretty bad on our walk to the bar.” He said quietly.

“After dinner?” Hannibal asked with concern.

“Yeah. I banged up my ankle pretty bad, I think.” Will’s eyes darted down to his feet, then back out the window.

“Let me see.”

Will looked over to Hannibal, eyes meek and glistening in the morning light, slid his chair back a bit, and then presented his foot. Hannibal leaned down and tenderly brought it to his lap. Will winced just slightly as he readjusted in his seat.

“It isn’t a sprain,” Hannibal said as he examined with light presses of his thumb, feeling tendons and bone to ensure no breaks for fractures were present. The ankle was swollen and slightly discolored, but that seemed to be the injury’s extent. Hannibal had to wonder why it was allowed to sit the entire night without medical care. “Did Mr. Kennedy not attend to you?” He asked, keeping his eyes locked to the foot so as not to seem probing.

Will huffed. “No—he shoved me with a laugh and told me to stop being a pussy.”

The heat was immediate and overwhelmed Hannibal to the point that he went to stand.

“Hannibal,” Will stopped him, his hands gesturing back to the chair, his voice so soft that it quelled the monster like a lullaby. “Just—please.” He whispered.

Hannibal relaxed back into his seat, hearing Will ask him to just listen instead of jumping to a conclusion followed by flaming action.

Hannibal wasn’t one to abandon a meal, least of all one of his own preparation, but this required his undivided attention. He pushed the plate away, poured them both coffee, distributed the small china cups, then leaned back, Will’s foot still across his thigh.

They both took a sip, then set their cups down, a loud silence befalling the room. It was one they had not known in that kitchen—the sound of discomfort. Hannibal moved to snuff the awkwardness.

He pressed his thumb to Will’s heel with precise pressure, moving in small circles up the length of his foot.

“Mmm,” Will hummed, his eyes fluttering a few times, his breath drawing out in length and depth.

Each small application of Hannibal’s hand endeavored to remind Will that Hannibal knew his body, had seen every inch, and even in the cumbersome moments, Hannibal knew how to touch it.

Will softened his body, sinking into his chair, dropping his crossed arms, instead, folding his hands in his lap. He glanced at Hannibal several times, eyes grateful.

With the facade dismantled, Hannibal moved in. “The night didn’t go well, I take it.”

“I don’t know.” Will shrugged. “I have no frame of reference to compare it to.”

“I’d say if he didn’t attend to your injuries, then perhaps he attended to little else,” Hannibal stated firmly. Will continued to avoid eye contact—his tell. “Did you sleep with him?” Hannibal asked, watching his hands fold over Will’s angelic foot.

Will took a stalled breath, clearly contemplating whether to speak candidly. His eyes cast out the window once more, changing color in the light from navy to sky blue. He sighed, then relinquished. “I wasn’t ready.” He uttered.

“For him to penetrate you?”

“It all became too much too fast. I thought I wanted it—then I didn’t. He didn’t much appreciate the ambiguity.”

Hannibal watched the remembrance swirl around in Will’s gaze to the point that they itched like grating sandpaper.

“You had every right to refuse, Will,” Hannibal said plainly, yet probing further still as his fingers continued to message. “He asked for a contraceptive.”

Will looked up from under his brow. Of course, Hannibal had listened to their conversation and, by extension, everything else. Will was both amused and concerned. He couldn’t remember everything he said, but he knew that Cooper was far too loud when he asked for an extra-large condom.

“I didn’t have one,” Will replied.

“Intentionally?”

“I honestly didn’t think about it,” Will said, taking another sip of coffee and returning the cup. “I didn’t think the night would get that far.”

Hannibal’s face broke only to offer a small smile. “Perhaps you avoided the preparation purposefully.”

“Sabotaged myself?” Will asked, eyebrows twisted.

“It’s a common tendency amongst the apprehensive.”

“Maybe—I uh—” Will looked at Hannibal, then down at his foot. “I gave him head, though.”

Hannibal looked up, again heat filling his body up to the collar, not breaking his composure for a moment. “Because you felt obligated—or because you wanted to?”

Will considered the question. “Yes—I think is the answer to that.”

Hannibal considered the response. “Did he return the courtesy?”

Will blinked, then slowly shook his head.

It was clear that Will was ashamed of his inability to boldly ask for the things he wanted when it came to matters of sex. He was indeed embarrassed, and Cooper Kennedy didn’t seem like the type of person to perceive such discomfort.

“Do you want to kill him?” Will asked, pushing his toes into Hannibal’s fingers.

“Do you want me to kill him?” Hannibal asked, pushing his fingers to meet the force.

“Answer the question.”

“Will—I find his behavior abhorrent.”

Will crossed his arms again. “What about my behavior?”

“I find it equally disturbing, but for very different reasons.”

“Do you want to kill me?”

Hannibal and Will’s eyes locked, the dark maroon meeting the faded blue, and Hannibal spoke with a widening grin, honesty laced inside the humor.

“Sometimes.”

They smiled at each other, eyes connecting in a reflection of each other, opposing but the same, simply happy to see each other for the first time in a while.

“Hannibal.”

“Mmm?” Hannibal hummed over his sip of coffee.

“Let’s have dinner.”

“We have dinner every night, Will.”

Will rolled his eyes. Hannibal was being purposefully thick, but Will knew it was the least of what he deserved, given that he had just come from a date with another man. Knowing he would have to work for his supper, he continued.

“I want you to make me dinner—and I want us—to—” Will fumbled over the words.

Don’t do it.

“—I want us to have dinner as a couple.”

Hannibal met his eyes again, unable to control the grin that still plastered his face. “You’d like us to go on a date?”

Will nodded, his smile matching Hannibal’s. “I’ll bring you those flowers I missed the first time.”

Hannibal grabbed both of Will’s legs and yanked. Will clung to the chair, chuckling lightly, as the larger man slid him and his seat across the floor, drawing them close together. Hannibal leaned in, applying a small kiss to Will’s cheek, tucking a curl behind his ear.

“That would be lovely.”

2.

Steady your hands before you begin

The blade sunk past the point of resistance, and the viscera emptied onto the large aluminum table, Mr. Grubts's legs twitching as the blood drained in a smooth slide, shock taking his motor control. Each inane twitch from the dying man brought Hannibal closer to the night to come, the fullness of a shared meal, the ease of warm wine, the softness of Will’s young body, the comfort of them sleeping intertwined beneath the satin sheets.

It beckoned Hannibal with beauty and intensity, a motivation unmatched by anything he’d known in his past. As his finger’s manipulated the open flesh, he thought of nothing else but the love that seared through him like a hot knife through butter.

He would give Will a night unlike the young man had ever known.

Steady your hands before you begin

Mr. Grubts had attended three of the past five parties Hannibal had attended, and three out of the past five times, Mr. Grubts had insulted Hannibal to the crowd, then, after several drinks, flirted insatiably. He had once pressed his hand to Hannibal’s ass after a blatant rejection, and Mr. Grubts life clock has been counting down ever since.

Now, it was almost up.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Grubts?” Hannibal asked, tilting his head to meet the writhing man’s eye-line. Mr. Grubts’s lips did their best to formulate words but were pulled back by the pain that followed his body’s innate reaction to disembowelment. “I understand you are in a great deal of pain, Mr. Grubts, but you must remain conscious for this. I’ll need quite a few organs, you see.”

Mr. Grubts did nothing but make one last attempt at a sorrowful moan before Hannibal slid both hands into the shiny red abdomen. The flashing blue and red lights filtered through the metal blinds, blood nearly unseen as it spilled onto the red concrete. Sirens wailed loudly then faded out, the soft accompaniment of techno music flowing in behind.

Every organ made a wet thud against the glass containers he set them in, heat and moisture rising from each one to create a thin fog around the pyrex dishes. Kidneys. Liver. Sweetbreads. Perhaps the heart as well. He'd take the shank for the main course once Mr. Grubst was gone entirely from the body. The roaring table saw would be the tool for that task.

While Cooper Kennedy was the prime candidate for this evening's meal, it was a much larger ask on such short notice. That would have to be a ritual Hannibal shared with Will in due time. Tonight, Mr. Grubst would have to do.

As Hannibal washed in the utility shower, the sweet smell of copper washing down the drain, followed by the clean smell of silky soap, he thought of various herb and spice combinations, the possible theme for the evening, what utensils and dishware he would use.

Perhaps he would choose a deep blue table runner to bring out Will's complexion. Bee's wax candles in silver holders for ambiance. Crystal stemware, sterling utensils, and plates on cobalt glass chargers.

A night in dedication to Will Graham.

His first stop post-carving was, of course, the sommelier. He purchased two bottles of red and brandy for after dinner. Will preferred scotch or whiskey, but this was an optimally aged brown liquor with added sweetness. A hint of cherry, one of Will's favorite flavors.

He went to the greengrocer to purchase endives, basmati rice, ginger, and garlic. He picked out linen napkins with lace interlay and blue trim. Perhaps Blue Willow would be a nice pattern for the evening.

On his walk home, he passed the open-air market to purchase more Valencia oranges for tomorrow's dose. The same small canned goods stand was closing up for the day and he saw the tower of bright daisies, smiling like small rays of sunshine. He wondered if those would be the flowers Will chose as his gift, and Hannibal's heart nearly burst.

This night would usher in a new era for them. One of romance and elation.

He thought of the daisies, their symbolic value, their floral scent mixing with the herbal aromas and spiced flavors of the evening.

Tonight would lead to sex. Hannibal was sure of it. The Will he wished to taste was the one enraptured by every event that preceded it—a Will that tasted of his true nature built on the foundations they laid inside that apartment in Williamsburg.

3.

He knew something was wrong.

Hannibal took less than two steps into the building and he knew.

He had been gone too long, and now the walls were clenching tight around his body. The smell of Arabica beans filtered in from next door, roasting for tomorrow. It was a stench that lingered inside Hannibal's nostrils on a continual loop, unlike most people who would forget about the smell after a while. Often, when the atmosphere caved in on him, Hannibal became keenly aware of its fragrance—the burning of something once alive.

He made his way to the elevator in much more eager steps, concern adding to his swiftness. The ascension was physically tormenting. He knew something horrible awaited him.

He fumbled with his keys in the front door's lock. He never did acquire the correct sequence, always using the wrong key first. Half of him begged to knock on the door—have Will answer—but just as he was about to, the key slid in and unlatched the tumbler.

The door swung open, and silence marred the space.

"Will?" He beckoned, dropping his keys to the dish.

There was no response.

The hallway leading to the kitchen suddenly became endless. He knew Will was in there. He could smell the flowers, the damp clean hair marked by sweet coconut, and the over-use of his new cologne. But something about that moment sucked away all delight: a mood, a feeling, a sensation.

Hannibal had not steadied his hands as he originally thought. Something made them sloppy. Hannibal had made a mistake, and he knew it.

His feet took him past the entryway, his black medical bag dangling from his bent fingers. He turned the corner, disappointment opening before him.

A large bundle of white daisies laid on the breakfast table, pale green stems broken and bent, petals splayed across the glass and floor. Even in his particularly broody state, Will looked like a vision. Dark washed jeans and leather boots, an Oxford button-up underneath Hannibal's cashmere sweater that was never returned—a gesture made in earnest. He sat, injured foot propped up on a pulled-out chair, inhaling smoke from his lit cigarette—a gesture made in malice. He exhaled a large white stream and tapped the small stick to the edge of his crystal ashtray.

Hannibal immediately noticed the two accompanying objects—the clear indication of how this night would now end—an open Rolodex and a small screw-top porcelain jar.

“Welcome home, Hannibal.” Will sneered, anger making his words sharp.

Despite being caught, as red-handed as he was not hours ago, Hannibal tried to continue the farce, ensuring he did not admit to guilt before guilt was implied. “What is this about?” He asked, face innocent, setting his bag down by his side.

Will was not about to play that game. “You know what this is about.”

“I’m sorry, Will, you’ll have to—"

Will shuffled quickly, yanking a card from the Rolodex and flicking it into the air in Hannibal’s direction.

Hannibal bent down and picked up—what he already knew was—Cooper Kennedy’s business card. His thumb flicked the bent corner as he peered down at the embossed writing, the name and title detailing an individual who had, yet again, managed to ruin his evening.

“You’ve been in my room,” Will said, exhaling another puff of smoke.

Hannibal walked to the table and set down the card. “You know who I am, Will. You knew of my processes and my proclivities. I can’t imagine you expected any less of me in these circumstances.”

Will huffed loudly—and sarcastically—then snuffed out his cigarette. He took hold of the porcelain jar, unscrewing the top, then upturned it. Hannibal lurched for a moment, then stayed himself. Six small amber vials toppled out onto the table, one rolling to the floor and shattering.

“Is this who you are too?” Will asked, picking up the remaining five in a handful. “I’m destined to always be your little science experiment—huh?”

Hannibal met his gaze—maroon meeting cobalt.

“Everything I do is solely for your—"

Will stood up quickly, the chair squealing under the force at which it was sent back. Will reeled back and threw all five tiny bottles at Hannibal, stinging through his heavy clothing, before falling to the floor and shattering.

“Will—”

Suddenly, it wasn’t enough for Will. Everything became a bullet, and Will’s fist became a gun. He picked up the flowers and threw them, picked up the Rolodex and threw it, picked up the ashtray, and threw it as hard as he could.

Hannibal dodged the large missile, allowing the heavy glass object to significantly dent the wall behind him.

“Will!”

“Fuck you—Hannibal!” Will started, the voices now clearly uttering his words before he spoke them.

Cooper Kennedy isn’t the mistake

“Cooper Kennedy isn’t the mistake.”

You are.

“You are.”

KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

1.

Will sent the folded corner of a blue ringspun cotton shop towel through the center of a silver lug nut. He blew on it softly once it was polished and returned it to the drawer, shutting it tightly. These recent weeks brought long days at the shipyard. More than ever, Will was organizing and cleaning every last inch of his space, staying into the later parts of the evening.

Home had become a minefield that he rarely wanted to return to.

Beverly always waited on him. She didn't have to, but she could clearly tell the past several weeks had been a struggle for Will. He never verbally expressed much, editing out the details about Hannibal and including more information about Cooper Kennedy—but Beverly knew.

Will spent weeks showing up late to work, then suddenly returned to his regular, punctual routine. He smoked more than usual. His lunches were no longer elegantly laid out, and the coffee no longer tasted the same. Beverly watched with a caring gaze as her friend fought his inner demons, such as that day when Will polished every nut and bolt until almost 8:00 PM.

She came to lean against his desk just as he finished putting his things away, sliding a burgundy beanie over her onyx hair. Cold had officially fastened itself to the city. All breaths came out as vapor now, even in the heat of the Levy & Akers Engine and Machine shop. She folded her arms together and shivered inside her waxed jacket. They were both out of things to say. They had both used up all their words for the day, but they needed to get home, and Beverly knew she would have to coax Will out the door by chatting—distracting him from his own mind.

Her eyes scanned Will's desk, looking for something to spark a conversation. They finally landed on an item Will probably didn't want Beverly to know about. That was made clear by the fact that he had tucked it away, almost out of sight. Beverly liked things that were tucked away. She liked, even more, to bring those things out into the light.

"Doc—what—is—this?" She asked, wide-eyed as her long fingers delicately grasped the metal band of a brand new Rolex watch from its very specially placed position high above where any grease could reach it.

Will huffed, rolling his eyes. "It's a watch—Beverly."

"I can see it's a watch." She said, sucking her teeth at his attitude. She slid the watch over her boney wrist and latched the clasp, letting the oversized navy blue face stare back at her. "Did Cooper give it to you?"

Will closed his eyes in exasperation. "Yes."

“How long have you two been going out now?” She asked, glaring at him from under her brow.

“Six weeks.”

“Six weeks?”

“Yes, Beverly. Six weeks.”

“Hm.” She said, unlatching the bracelet and handing it over to Will.

He slid it on, then stood, pulling his jacket off the back of his chair. “What is that—‘hm’?” He asked, sarcastically mimicking her inflecting and tugging the shoulders of his coat into place.

She shrugged her folded arms with a smile. “I don’t know, Doc. That just seems a little early for such extravagant gifts.”

Will started collecting his things but said nothing.

“I mean—don’t you think it’s a little fast?” Beverly continued.

“I don’t know, Bev. I don’t know what’s fast and what’s slow.”

Beverly took two cigarettes from the box in her pocket, plugging both into her mouth, lighting them, then handing one to Will.

“Thank you,” He said before taking a drag.

“Doc, you don’t have to know the rules in order to know when something feels wrong.” She said softly through a stream of smoke, flicking some ash onto the floor.

“This doesn’t feel wrong,” Will replied, stick jangling between his lips as he locked up his desk.

“Oh no?”

“No.”

“How’s Hannibal?” She replied, standing fully.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Will asked, rather terse, stuffing several items into his leather bag.

“Seems like every time you have trouble with him, you and Cooper get closer.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is. The last time you fought with Hannibal—the literal day after you called me and said you weren’t sure about Cooper—you made another date with him. What is that about?”

Will exhaled quickly, vapor mixing with smoke, trying to make it sound like a laugh, but it definitely did not.

It was true. The dates with Cooper Kennedy continued.

Will had a very harsh fever for such a simple thing. Replacements—the carbon copy that misused all the important pieces of a narrative—were cheap, a dime a dozen. They came in multiple forms, twinkling reflections of the desired personality setting off a chain reaction. These events worked only to mold any ordinary stranger into the object of affection, love, and friendship.

Will sought and found comfort in it.

It was the only place left to find comfort, apart from his friendship with Beverly, which was confirmed only in the depth that it could be. She still didn't know about Will's past, and therefore, she didn't truly know Will. That arm's length was enough space to pile the bricks, erecting a wall against true intimacy.

So the dates continued.

Even in Cooper's complexities and simplicities, the combination of the elements creating a fully formed human being had never brought Will the satisfaction he felt, lying in the California King Bed down the hallway in his apartment. How long had Will blatantly denied or accepted his self-understanding that Hannibal was irreplaceable? He had done everything in his power, formulated and plotted, to escape the union that was his connection to Hannibal.

And Hannibal had done the same. The trophies that man kept, the little birds, as Will so sarcastically dubbed them, were little more than replicas, clones, the shell that contained a falsehood.

Carrying Will across the frozen landscape, saving him, was the first flush of any hope Hannibal had ever entertained about finding a life he could happily accept was his. Will reciprocated. He thought that gesture had a purpose, meaning, and truth. He believed, quite naively, that Hannibal was apologizing for the past while laying the groundwork for a potential future. Yet, the discovery of Hannibal doping him, manipulating him, and plotting the demise of his personal life all but washed that future away. Those hopes were gone now.

Partnership became a foreign concept.

Will was chasing these same hollow casings, desperate and determined to prove that Hannibal was not the end all be all.

So the dates continued.

Will flicked off the light on his work desk, threw his bag over his shoulder, and started walking away. Beverly tossed her cigarette away and came up beside him, hugging his arm tight.

“Honestly though, Will. If you like Cooper, then I’ll like Cooper, just—” She paused for a second before making her following statement, swallowing hard. “—even wealthy men don’t like spending money unless they think they’ll get a return on their investment.”

Will squeezed his arm and kissed her on the temple, flicking his cigarette off to the side. He appreciated the sentiment but ignored it all the same.

The truth was, things were escalating at a pace Will didn’t genuinely anticipate. If he were honest with himself, it was a pace he wasn’t comfortable with, either.

Will was constantly bombarded with sentimental tokens of affection. It started as simple notes and messages, but they were incessant and sometimes a little too—*possessive*—for Will’s liking.

[You’re the most amazing man I’ve ever met.]

[Tonight was unlike any I’ve ever had.]

[I know it’s only been a few weeks, but I think I’m really falling for you, Will Graham.]
[I like you too Cooper.]
[No, Will. I’m falling. Head over heels. I love calling you mine.]

There was a stack of small paper notes on Will’s dresser, ones that came tacked to the ever-growing number of gifts Will received. He now had an almost complete set of brand new clothing, stuff he wasn’t incredibly partial to but shirts and shoes that Cooper complimented non-stop. Then came the Rolex. Will did wear that one because he liked it. Truthfully, he had no intention of returning that watch should the two men ever part ways.

He liked it that much.

Every gift came with a single card with silk embossed trim, typed out perfectly with words Will couldn’t fully comprehend simply because he didn’t feel them. He did feel them—as a reflection of Cooper’s enthusiasm—but not entirely. Not in the way he should.

For my pretty Will Graham.

You’ll look like an angel in this one. My Angel.

For the man I can’t live without, here is something special for you, Will Graham. From your Cooper.

Sometimes, the attention made Will’s head spin. It was a strange sensation that rose every time he would receive something new. A lightness that sat like a pocket of air just underneath his sternum.

While it was filling, it was also empty—hollow.

Cooper was always holding Will’s hand now. He wrapped his arm around Will, scooped him up, and kissed him at any moment, in any public place, especially in front of Cooper’s

friends. Especially in front of Hannibal. Something about those instances seemed performative to Will, even when they were genuine.

Will recalled one night when they attended a party together at Cooper's apartment. The cute intimacy seemed to overflow, only to have Cooper angry with him hours later for supposedly talking too long with one of Cooper's friends.

"He doesn't seem like your type, Will," Cooper said as they cleaned up empty glasses and leftover plates.

Will chuckled, thinking it was a joke, "I don't have a type, Cooper."

"I'm not kidding. You have a type, and Jacob isn't your type. Flirting like that is insulting to me, and—it's embarrassing for you."

Cooper didn't seem to care for anyone else, male or female, giving Will any amount of attention—that included both Hannibal and Beverly.

Will could understand Cooper's resentment for Hannibal. Will couldn't understand his resentment for Beverly.

Cooper stayed the night often enough to hear Will and Hannibal fight. They were usually petty things about putting things back where they belonged or leaving certain windows open. Still, when Will would return to his room, it was only an added aggravation that Cooper generally wanted a say in the matter.

"Why are you fighting with him?"

"I'm not fighting with him. He's high-strung sometimes, and I have to deal with it."

"You let him walk all over you. He doesn't care about you."

"Why does it bother you?"

"Because I care about you like he never can."

Will specifically avoided all details of his relationship with Hannibal. He painted Hannibal as a mystery so that it would seem that he was a mystery to everyone. Cooper wasn't the brightest when it came to reading other people, but part of him always knew it wasn't true.

Then, there was his objection to Beverly. Such instances were growing in number, such as that night when Will and Beverly walked out of the shipyard, arm in arm.

"Oh. My. God. Doc—look," Beverly said, nodding her head toward a car parked on the curb.

Leaned against the blacked-out vehicle was Cooper, dressed in a charcoal Armani suit and grey overcoat, clutching, *yet another*, bouquet of peach snapdragons. Will looked over, eye lighting up at the sight, feeling the warmth of hope that the gesture might be genuine.

“Coop—what are you doing here?” Will said, walking over and taking the flowers. He pecked Cooper quickly on the lips, still apprehensive about public displays of affection. Cooper, however, scooped him up, holding tight until Will relinquished a longer, more passionate kiss.

“I finished early,” Cooper said, finally dropping the smaller man. “Thought I might surprise you.” His eyes quickly searched Beverly with hidden disdain. “What were you two doing?”

“We just finished up too, Coop. We were about to walk home.”

“Well—look no further, baby.” Cooper smiled and opened the car door. “Your chariot awaits.” He finished, ushering his arm as if this was the grandest thing ever offered to an individual in the history of the earth.

Will turned back to Beverly, smiling sweetly. “You want a ride, Bev?”

Cooper froze, his harsh green-eyed gaze boring a hole into Beverly, making it clear that the invitation was not extended to her.

Beverly did not like this—not one bit.

She bit her lip, staring back at Cooper with her sharp dark eyes. She knew that if she were to ride along, it would only mean drama for Will, but she ensured Cooper (with a look that burned much brighter than his) that this would *not* be the end of things.

“No, thanks Doc. I have to stop by the market anyway.”

“Alright, Bev.”

“Call me later!”

“Sure thing,” Will said, sinking into the car. Cooper closed the door, watching as Beverly watched, then climbed into the opposite side.

The dark car drove off, and Beverly’s guts twisted hard.

2.

An amalgam of sticky blackness, opaque and gooey, flicking and shaking, painted splatters as it closed in around his life. It mixed like oil and turpentine, pungent like ammonia, and sucked him downward, closing in around him like quicksand. From the airless pit—a body grew.

Will could feel the weight, the bulk, the volume of a man beside him. He could feel the breathing beneath his arm draped over the torso. His fingers laced through the hair on the

belly, inhaling the sweet aroma—musk and honeysuckle, the cherry blossom shampoo—the amber heat of leftover cologne.

It was perfect and pristine, the comfort entering Will's body just before consciousness broke the lull of sleep in a snap. Will's eyes popped open to the foggy morning, blue and grey through the window, and the body beside him deflated, retreated from reality, and disappeared into nothing.

It had been nothing more than a dream.

Will no longer slept in Hannibal's bed. Not since their last fight. That side of the apartment, where the sun rose and shone bright, was a fading and distant memory. Will's side of the apartment was cold and vast. His bed—an average size queen—had become enormous, engulfing him until he drowned in its loneliness. He missed the man who used to lay next to him, despite his anger which was now nothing more than an ember, the last of its orange heat fading day by day.

After that night in October, the one where Will had given Hannibal the benefit of the doubt only to have it dashed by a ramekin full of LSD, Will decided he didn't have to play by any rules, live by any standard, or snuff out any defiant or malicious tendencies.

However, it was hard to resolve his yearning for Hannibal and his hate for Hannibal. More often than not, the desire to be in and around that dark man felt like a boulder, immoveable through his ever-changing emotional state.

Will hated Hannibal. He hated his hate. He hated that his hatred never lasted long enough or had enough power to trump his desire.

He licked his dry, chapped lips, hand splaying across the sheets, feeling the empty space beside him. He rolled over onto his back, carelessly pulling his side table drawer open and retrieving the item that now lived there—a small lock of grey flecked hair.

He dropped to his upper lip, releasing his hands to his chest. He inhaled deeply, eyes closing as he recreated the substance of the man from his dreams.

He rolled the coarse filaments between his upper lip and nose. The fibers were perfect, beyond delicious. Something he could consume in a swallow. He thought of that beautiful armpit that he could so easily bury his face into, thought of the inner thighs that were always so fragrant with Hannibal's smell.

He clenched his hips as his cock thickened.

The soft tongue stroking between his cheeks, cool then warm, relaxing him with pleasurable applications of affection. He missed it. He wanted it back. His hands clutched at the comforter as he writhed a bit, pinching the hair between lip and nose, moving inside the agony.

He tossed back the blankets and sheets, exposing his naked body to the open air. He looked down to see his cock twitch, the head already glistening with precum.

Perfect.

Chin still tucked, he grabbed the lock of hair and tossed it back into the drawer. He took his phone, slid open the screen, then clutched the base of his hard, veiny length. One thumb tap, one flash, and he had the picture he needed. He released it, then held his phone with both hands. He readjusted his head on the pillow as he worked through the steps.

New message.
Attach photo.
Send.
Lock.
Drop phone.
Jerk off.

Dick pics were a funny thing.

Will received them—mostly unwarranted—from Cooper. While they always made him jump, aroused him a bit, they mostly went unresponded to. What was Will to say?

[Hey, big guy. Nice one.] ?

Will was happy enough with Cooper's dick, but he didn't want nor need a picture of it. However, it did give him a great number of ideas.

In light of recent events, Will decided that if he wanted to take a picture of his erect cock and send it to Hannibal's phone, he could.

Just to fuck with him.

3.

Hannibal was already perched on the side of his bed when his phone dinged. He lazily wiped the sleep from his eye, letting out a silent yawn as he reached for the device. He tapped the screen.

One new message from Will Graham.

When he clicked on it, his eyes shot wide open. Hannibal was suddenly very awake. He blinked hard a few times, shaking his head like a dog, then looked again with refocused vision.

There below him, in all its glory, was Will Graham's erect pink cock, outlined in dark bristly hairs.

Hannibal's wet tongue swashed over his dry bottom lip before his teeth bit down and then spat it out. He inaudibly chuckled, then shook his head once more.

How very amusing.

He locked the phone and tossed it to the bed.

Hannibal had jerked off to the sound of Will fucking before.

Mr. Kennedy had stayed the night a handful of times in the past six weeks, and he was, indeed, louder than he needed to be—by anyone's standard. But, after a while, his gross moans became white noise, and one night Hannibal had heard another, softer, quieter grunt under the mish mash of *oh fucks* and *fuck yeahs*. It was a moan of pleasure, Will's voice inflecting it, and Hannibal remembered how stiff his cock became, a sudden violent jolt of sparkling elation, searing through his body in mere moments.

Hannibal didn't know what was happening in that room during those nights—if penetration had occurred or not—but the care had faded away when he heard the sound of Will's soft whimpering.

It took several of these nights to finally filter through every other sound, narrowing his hearing down like applying a filter, only listening to the fluttered exhales, begging with lightly opened lips, uttering the most flagrant and amazing words.

Hannibal could easily pair those beautiful moans with the picture now in his phone, but he knew all this was intentional.

Will had another date with Cooper Kennedy in less than ten hours, and here he was, sending images of his penis down the hall to a man he claimed to so vehemently hate.

Hannibal was familiar with this behavior, which was probably the abject reason he despised it so much. These games were ones he knew uncomfortably well. While Will had claimed he no longer wished to play such games—per their last argument—he continued to move his pieces, quite literally, across the board. Hannibal began to understand that Will was looking for some unknown end here. Will was trying to ask for something without asking—even if the young man didn't know it.

So if this were the game, then the game he would play.

4.

Central Park was misty that night. In the dark, a white glow hung around the orange street lamps and dissipated as it reached up toward the sky. It was easy to walk like a looming silhouette in the fog, which was optimal for Hannibal as he tucked the collar of his wool coat up around his neck, black bag in tow.

Will and Cooper would be out for—at the very least—four hours, as was customary for their dates. They would adjourn to the apartment in Williamsburg anywhere past midnight, either

together or separately. That gave Hannibal four hours' worth of clear path to stalk outside Cooper Kennedy's apartment, hopefully making his way inside before the timetable ended.

This task, however, was easier said than done.

The Kennedys were of no relation to the political family of the same name. The family had been in New York since the city's infancy, starting as real estate tycoons, then branching out into the various areas that spread as time progressed. Car manufacturing. Oil reserves. Banking.

Cooper Kennedy was a successful lawyer, true enough, but that was not the seed of his wealth. The man was the poster boy, the heir to a multi-billion dollar family name who had connections with the likes of Rockefeller. He was a celebrity among the elite.

His apartment was the penthouse of a building perched on the corner of Central Park East, purchased for the cool price of $28 million. It was unlikely that Cooper Kennedy was ever told the word *no*, and surely the man had never wanted for anything. His nest was generously padded long before he was born.

This combination of factors almost always transforms young boys into dangerous men.

Hannibal turned the corner and came to the towering building. It was magnificent, Hannibal could only admit. Built with pale grey sandstone, cleaned routinely, the structure had cornices and lintels littered with gothic features and carvings. Gargoyles with expressive faces decorated every spire and drain pipe. The roof, tall and ominous, was once a shimmery copper, now stained a pale sea-foam color by the elements.

The first attempt at entering a building such as this always started with the appropriate attire.

Check.

Hannibal had dressed for the occasion. He looked as though he lived there, which in any other circumstance, might have been the case. He approached the doorman, untucking his coat collar and smoothing his lapel.

"Good evening, sir. Can I help you?" The man asked.

A professional doorman was always the first hindrance. If he were good at his job, he would recognize any stranger on sight. However, that didn't stop Hannibal.

"I'm here to see Cooper Kennedy," Hannibal offered.

"I'm afraid he is out for the evening, sir."

"I am expected. I don't mind waiting if that is the issue."

"Of course," The man walked Hannibal to the door. "Do you have the keycode he provided?"

A four-digit electronic keypad sat next to the door's handle. The doorman very clearly had the universal code. Hannibal could easily threaten this man, force him to use it, but that left a nasty trail, one Hannibal was trying his best to avoid given that he was on the run from the Alphabet Boys.

"I'm afraid he was absent-minded in the details of our meeting," Hannibal said, flashing a sharp-fanged smile, trying to seem somewhat docile.

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to wait for his return. My apologies."

Hannibal couldn't begrudge the man his professionalism.

"Yes. Thank you for your time." Hannibal finished, eyeing the details of the lobby before walking off.

There were two guards. A double-monitored CCTV feed with views from multiple angles around the building's interior and exterior and the elevator required another four-digit code.

This would be more difficult than Hannibal previously calculated. He would have to return another night, or better still, have Cooper come to him, perhaps to a precarious location near Hell's Kitchen.

Slightly defeated, Hannibal started his journey home. He readjusted his collar and headed down the block to hail a cab. Just as he turned the corner, his shoulder collided with a much larger man. Both spun back to look at each other.

"Lecter?"

"Mr. Kennedy."

Damn.

"What are you doing on this end of town? I figured you'd be in by now." Cooper said with a smile, snarky in his attempt to inform Hannibal that he was well aware of the man's daily habits.

"Will left his keys to the apartment. I thought to return them."

"Wow. Awful sweet of you. But uh," Cooper took a step closer to Hannibal, trying to assert dominance with his size, "He had his keys with him when I dropped him off about half-hour ago," He finished, rubbing his dimpled chin.

Hannibal looked into him, eyes dark under the dimming light, unswayed by whatever stature Mr. Kennedy was trying to establish for himself. While it was true, Hannibal had never stood next to Mr. Kennedy and his height was impressive—towering several inches above him—it meant nothing to Hannibal.

"My mistake then," Hannibal uttered, face unassuming, unreadable as an empty book.

“*Clearly*,” Cooper replied with narrowed eyes. He didn’t move. He wasn’t going to. Not until Hannibal started to walk off. It might have been the smartest thing Cooper Kennedy had ever done.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening, Mr. Kennedy,” Hannibal said, turning to resume his walk.

“You too, *Lecter*.”

Hannibal almost made the corner.

“Oh and—*Lecter!*” Cooper shouted.

Hannibal blinked, anger filling his neck, then turned, glinting scarlet meeting a washed sea of green.

“*I’d watch my back if I were you*.” Cooper asserted.

Hannibal did nothing, speaking clear and plain. “*My back isn’t the one to watch, Mr. Kennedy*.”

Cooper Kennedy narrowed his eyes, watching as Hannibal Lecter disappeared into the night.

5.

Hannibal returned to the apartment in Williamsburg, seething so hard his molars ground against each other. He would not abide these humiliations much longer. He pulled out his keys and inserted the gold one into the front door, unlocking it and entering the foyer. He checked the mail, as he always did, still blissfully unaware of the missing weight from his keyring, far too distracted by his hatred.

He went to the elevator, fumbled through his keys again, and suddenly became very aware of how light they were. The ring was missing two of the three keys he needed—the silver one for the elevator and the brass one for the door.

Hannibal sighed with a soft face, almost delighted by a tactic he had not predicted. Will was more clever than Hannibal gave him credit for.

The unpredictable Will Graham.

“*Get locked out, did you?*”

Hannibal turned to find Will walking through the front door, a bottle of whiskey in one hand, a sinister gleeful smile spread from ear to ear.

“Yes,” Hannibal said calmly, as innocent as a demonic dove.

“Might need these,” Will replied, drawing his hand from his pocket and handing Hannibal the two missing keys from his chain.

"I thought you were upstairs," Hannibal said, taking the keys.

"We were out of booze," Will replied curtly.

They said nothing to each other as they waited for the elevator. At least, Hannibal hoped Will would say nothing. He would much rather forgo any further insult to his pride. But Will did not heed hopes and wishes.

“Couldn’t get into Cooper’s apartment either, I take it.” The dark, sarcastic smugness was coated in a varnish of bitterness and amusement—a combination that Hannibal despised.

“I find it boorish that you’d assume—”

“Knock it off,” Will said as they entered the carriage, the gold door squealing closed.

Hannibal silenced again, resentment building up like helium inside a balloon. He stuck his newly found silver key into the wall and pressed the fourth-floor button.

The elevator started its ascension.

“He deals with men like you all the time, Hannibal. He knows what he’s doing.” Will said, one shoulder leaned into the wall, watching the numbers slowly count up.

Since Will was so feverishly devoting himself to candor, Hannibal decided he would express his true sentiment.

“You overestimate Cooper.” He stated clearly, watching the walls change beyond the golden gate.

“You underestimate Cooper.” Will retorted.

“I do not.”

“Yes, you do.”

Hannibal sighed a sigh that trailed a growl behind it. “You believe him to be more than he is.” He said.

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

At that point, Will blew out a sigh just as they reached the fourth floor.

Hannibal took out his reunited key set and began unlocking the doors. For the life of him, he could not understand why any key maker would choose 437 over perhaps the key’s purpose, such as *Entry*, *Lift*, and *Apartment*. He always had trouble keeping the keys sorted in his

mind, a fumbling that he had never experienced before in all his life, and it was just one more straw on the burdened camel's back that was his ego.

Will watched patiently for all of 0.2 seconds.

"*Christ, Hannibal*. How do you always get this wrong?" Will exclaimed in exasperation, stepping forward and snatching the keys away. "You'd think you had a key-sized room in that mind palace of yours." He unlocked the door and pushed it open. "It's the brass one." He finished, ushering Hannibal in with an open arm and a pretentious gloating face.

They unloaded in the entryway and stood in the hall a moment—frozen by their unending need to have the last word—before parting to opposite ends.

"Hannibal. You can't kill Cooper. He's a highly publicized figure with a list of enemies. Any suspicious death will be heavily investigated."

"Is that what he told you?"

Will nodded. "He mentioned it."

"My methods will be anything but suspicious."

Will paused for a moment, looking at Hannibal with more intention than Hannibal could contend with, something so vivid that it was almost blinding. There was a second, however brief, that Hannibal blinked away, the current too strong to maintain a connection.

In the past, Hannibal had seen glimpses of this man, the one under the shell, but only in moments, both fearsome and glorious, that Will was making a definitive choice and claiming a truth. This—this was a moment of truth.

"If Cooper goes missing, I'm the only new thing in his life—have you thought of that?"

"Cooper has many enemies as you mentioned—"

"*Hannibal.*"

Hannibal conceded. "We've managed to evade perception before, Will."

Will hung his head as he chuckled to himself, shaking it slowly before running a hand over his eyes, scalp, and neck. "We're on the run, Hannibal." His voice softened, that soothing tempo that sung Hannibal into submission. "We spent so long apart. And we just started this life together. Do you really want to see it end?"

Flushed, Hannibal took a breath, regaining his firm footing. He was about to speak when Will continued.

"I know you don't like him. But please. Don't ruin us on your journey to ruining him."

It stung worse than any icy knife and hurt more profoundly than any cut. Hannibal could hear Will beg for something, but he didn't know what. He took two large steps closer, tenderly

collecting Will's dangling fingers.

"Come to my bed tonight, Will. I can protect you from this."

Will slapped his hand away and met his eyes. "I'm not coming to your bed, Hannibal. Not anymore."

"*Don't do this*," Hannibal whispered, searching the younger man's face, pleading with the most authentic nature to show itself.

"I like Cooper. I enjoy spending time with him. You don't know anything about it."

Will walked far down the hall, an eternity away, sinking back into hiding as he slammed the door to his room shut.

Hannibal would refuse this rejection, and thus the game continued.

HE DOESN'T TAKE SUGAR

1.

A haze rolled in high above the city, a pale shade of grey hinting signs of the first snow. The air thinned and the pressure dropped, making it hard to take deep inhalations. Will sat on a stool at the kitchen island that morning, the slow onset of anxiety creeping around the edges of his chest. Each deep breath he tried to take prevented the darkness from encircling his vision—stopping the vignette before the fade to black—and opened him back into the moment. His heart rattled quickly against the thin skin just below the corner of his jaw, then dulled to damp thumps as the cold air reached through the expanse of his lungs.

The dawn seemed to ignore traffic noise outside. Actually, it seemed to ignore noise altogether. Sitting there alone, nothing more than a steaming cup of coffee in front of him, Will heard only his thoughts—his thoughts and the fading remnants of his company. The voices were still pure in their form, fainter, but still maintained their character and inflection.

Will knew that they were residual from the previous mind-bending episodes, yet he figured that the side effects would have worn off by now. They hadn’t. Not entirely. The voices continued to speak, but now Will refused to respond.

Where is he?

You have to keep track of him

You still don’t know what he’s capable of

Will hadn’t seen Hannibal for two days. They passed like ships in the night. Yes, it was unusual, but Will didn’t think much of it. Which wasn’t the truth at all. Will thought of nothing else.

It didn’t feel right to sit at the breakfast table without him. It didn’t feel right to try and eat breakfast without him. It didn’t feel right to exist without him.

Their last interaction hadn’t gone well. Standing in the hallway, bickering like an old married couple, had been awkward. Petulant and moody, Will refused Hannibal's advance without thinking. Still, that type of interlude had never deterred Hannibal from continuing his day-to-day life in the past.

Hannibal didn’t avoid awkward situations. Hannibal didn’t avoid anything.

Not even dick pics.

Sometime after the third or fourth picture Will sent to Hannibal’s phone, Hannibal started replying. It became a running joke that they never discussed in person, but they regularly

exchanged commentary via the digital ether. One morning, Will took a picture he was pretty proud of, chuckling to himself as he sent it down the hall, rubbing his face afterward, wondering what hell he was doing.

He had not expected a response.

After all, all previous images went unresponded to, as Will thought was customary for such actions. He really should have known better. Hannibal wasn't a *customary* man.

{You're up early}

When he saw that small three-word message staring back at him in the early morning darkness, Will smiled immediately. His thumbs worked their magic over the flat keyboard, sending back in response:

[Getting ready to start the day.]

{Do you require assistance?}

[I found a video to help me out.]

{A tutorial?}

[Very funny.]

The conversations went on throughout the day, intermittent, but always making both men smile or chuckle. Will worked hard to keep his messages from the wondering eyes of Cooper, who questioned Will almost every time he opened his phone.

"Who are you texting?" He would ask without fail.

"Beverly."

"Tell her you're with me, and you'll have to talk later."

"Yep—I will do that."

Will's thumbs worked quickly, turning his body so he could hide his smile from Cooper.

[I wonder what my little friend is doing tonight?]

{Please ensure you update me when you find out.}

Then suddenly, less than 24 hours ago, the messages stopped, and Will started to worry.

He didn't hear Hannibal come in last night. It must have been late because even in a dead sleep, Will would wake when he heard Hannibal walking around the apartment. It was as if he had a sixth sense for the comings and goings of his—*roommate.*

Perhaps Hannibal had been out stalking. Sometimes that happened. It was rare, of course. Due to their current situation, Hannibal was trying to be cautious, which Will appreciated. But even on those nights, Will would hear the elevator rattle, and he always found it comforting to know Hannibal was once again occupying his space.

Then there was the fact that Hannibal's bedroom door was closed when Will passed it that morning. Hannibal's door was never closed. *Never*. Not even once. Maybe it would be partway cracked, pulled to, but even those instances were *incredibly* rare. No, that morning, the thing was bolted tight.

Will took another deep breath, expanding his chest and sending the anxiety from his lungs. He took another sip of coffee, trying not to worry. The cashmere of his unreturned sweater shifted across the front of his body, and he thought back to that morning so many months ago when he rubbed his chest against Hannibal's back. He recalled how sensitive his nipples felt, sliding inside the delicate fabric, the heat of Hannibal's body outside it.

Will reached down and adjusted himself, sighing hard, shaking the sensation from his mind.

He couldn't be thinking like that. Not anymore.

Will's thoughts shifted to Cooper, and he took another large inhale.

More and more often, the thought of Cooper was raising his heart rate in ways that were not joyous or loving.

Cooper hadn't stayed over in a week. He was busy with a case, which was fine by Will. He thought they were getting a little too close anyway, that maybe Cooper was much more dedicated to the relationship.

Just the other day, he brought up the subject of moving in together. It was one of the rare occasions that Will stayed at Coop's place. Will never did like doing that. The penthouse was large and vacant, with very little light, a blend of dark colors and rough textures. Will couldn't touch half the things in that apartment. Starkly contrasted items went from abrasive material to sleek surface way too quickly. It didn't echo, but when Will would think back to the space, he always recalled their conversations ricocheting off the walls—for whatever reason.

Cooper wasn't a reader, so there were very few books at his place. Cooper preferred television, and Will didn't always enjoy the lights and sounds, especially if he had a long or stressful day. Also, Cooper slept on an insanely firm mattress, which always hurt Will's lower back. Will kept almost no clothing at Cooper's place, so it was hard for him to get ready in the morning. He had none of the amenities of say, Hannibal's shower, for example, so Will often returned home before going to work, which was a massive pain in the ass.

Will had a million excuses not to stay with Cooper, and he used every single one except for the truth—he didn't want to sleep apart from Hannibal.

A type of protection encased Will knowing there was a monster at the end of the hall. That shield brought Will a small sense of peace unlike he had ever felt in his life. Even with the

itching red wallpaper, the crackling, squealing lift, and the new group of vocal, invisible friends, Will preferred that apartment to almost every other location on earth.

Especially on the nights when Cooper became a bit like a monster himself.

The night before he left on his business trip, sitting perched together on the edge of Will's bed, Cooper said *I love you* for the very first time.

Will didn't know what to do with himself as the three words fell from Cooper's mouth with both passion and ease. He didn't know how to respond or what to say in return. He'd never spoken those words and meant them.

The last time he heard them uttered was—well—he couldn't honestly remember, but he knew a woman had said them. And somehow, the three words coming from the 6'5", broader than a mountain, thick-dicked lawyer sounded exactly like how she uttered them.

Forgettable.

It twisted like a screw inside his heart. He felt something, but it hurt, tickled, and twinged more than it brought release or comfort. When he didn't say it back right away, it caused a significant problem between the two men.

"Why can't you say it back?" Cooper had said, gently caressing Will's face with his large hand.

"I—I don't know if I'm there—just yet, Coop," Will stammered.

Cooper quickly shoved him away, becoming the polar opposite of who he was only moments before.

The following day Cooper left town for work, and it came as a great relief to Will. Something about that shove, the intensity of it, the carelessness and lack of concern for its repercussion, made Will's heart jump in panic. He had never felt the full force of Cooper's arm before.

Will realized then how much physical power the man had over him.

He took another sip of coffee, turning to look out the vertical casement window into the quiet morning, eyeing the fire escape. His mouth became a sponge, absorbing all the saliva, leaving nothing but an arid landscape begging for a sweet smoke rain.

Will was in a difficult place—emotionally.

Cooper would be so kind sometimes, not the abject mannequin who walked around with little more than sex appeal to offer, and Will would feel a warm watery rush of happiness overtake his insides, snatching them quickly and overwhelming him.

I'm lucky—he would think.

And then, because he was working hard to compete against Hannibal, Will would think he was way luckier to be with Cooper than with Hannibal. While Hannibal had never used the

full force of his arm on Will, he had used the full force of a blade to his belly—the full force of a power tool to his skull.

Cooper kept the good things in check—never asked too much of him—didn't lace his drinks with LSD. Cooper was happy when Will was happy, *for the most part*. So, Will felt an obligation to remain happy, no matter what. Will would push out the idea that he deserved more and render himself content.

You are content

Don't say things that aren't true

He would work harder to express his gratitude to Cooper for that contentment—maybe say *I love you* back, not because he felt that way but because Cooper deserved it—didn't he? Then suddenly, he felt the overwhelming rush of guilt.

Whatever the sensation was, it didn't seem deep enough to deserve the word. Who was he lying to? Cooper? Or himself?

You aren't lying to anyone.

You're lying to everyone

"*Stop it*," Will thought he whispered, then quickly silenced himself. He took another swig of coffee.

For a moment, Will wondered what the three words sounded like coming from Hannibal.

I love you

Low and grating, but sweet and soft. Will imagined it was similar to biting into a cool peach on a hot summer day.

As he went for another sip of coffee, he heard Hannibal's bedroom door open and shut. He adjusted in his seat, roughing his hair quickly, checking his sweater, then resting on his elbows, coffee perched in his hand—you know, causal.

If he looked sexy, then it was definitely an accident.

Out of the corner of his eye, a body appeared through the doorway, and Will did a double-take.

It was not Hannibal's body.

"Good morning," a naked man announced as he walked into the kitchen.

Will nearly dropped his coffee. He had to work several times to place it correctly back in the saucer, watching the nude stranger with narrow and confused eyes.

What.the.actual.fuck?

The man was handsome, trim yet muscular, strong jaw and rich black hair and eyebrows as thick as caterpillars. He wasn't very tall, but his dark skin glowed without any sunlight. His wide smile and carefree attitude made it seem like he lived there. He didn't, of course. Will blinked hard a few times, almost waiting for an explanation. What was this strange man doing in Will's home?

Will cleared his throat. "Um—*good morning*,"

"Is there any coffee left?" The man asked like he already knew Will, his words soaked in a thick syrup of some unplaced accent.

Still collecting the whirlwind that was now his mental state, Will tried to offer some words in return. "There—um—is—" He picked up his cup and gestured it toward the Moka pot on the stove, a huge lump of disbelief clogging his throat.

But the man was already making himself right at home. The exhibitionist started dumping not one, but two, cupfuls of coffee. He then started fumbling through the cabinets. Will's eyes shifted, watching every movement of the man's hands as they flipped through things that didn't belong to them, putting themselves on everything, tainting items with their smell and flesh. He plucked the lids off several ceramic dishes with small spoons popping from the top.

Salt. Pepper. Sugar.

The man smiled as he discovered what he wanted, then scooped several spoonfuls of the crystal white sweetener into his cup. He went to dole a scoop into the second cup. Will lurched. The liquid moment suddenly solidified like ice. Will realized this man was Hannibal's latest conquest.

"He doesn't take sugar in his coffee," Will said, almost by automation.

"Oh—" The man said, raising his eyebrows. "—thanks." He returned the spoon and then reached a hand over the counter. "Gustav."

"Will," He said, returning a brief, unenthusiastic handshake. Will's hand suddenly felt dirty. He wanted to wash it. He wanted to wash his entire body. He pressed three fingers to his sternum and scratched.

"Yeah—I know who you are, actually," Gustav said like a ray of sunshine. "Hannibal mentioned he had a roommate."

Will did not reciprocate the pleasant attitude. "*I'm sure he did*." He retorted.

Gustav leaned his naked ass against the counter and sipped his coffee, touching everything with his fucking body. His uncut cock laid listless against his thighs, long even in its flaccid state.

Will couldn't stop the series of thoughts strung together like ticker tape, unfurling the longer he stared.

Where had Hannibal touched him? Did he touch this man softly, or was he rough? Did Hannibal fuck him, or did he fuck Hannibal? Or both. Did he suck Hannibal's dick? Did he enjoy it? Did Hannibal enjoy it? What sounds did Hannibal make? Were they real or fake? Was this a game, or did he actually find *Gustav* attractive? Were they dating? Were they going to date?

What the actual fuck?

"So—how long have you two lived together?" Gustav asked, breaking Will from his stream of consciousness, starting a conversation as if they were having cocktails at a dinner party.

"Uh—we—"

"Almost a year now," Hannibal said, entering the space like a champion of champions, a beige silk robe tied loosely around his bare chest.

Hannibal immediately made direct eye contact with Will, wearing that dumb, cheeky grin that showed his sharp fangs.

Gustav perked up, standing from his lean. "I would have brought it to you, my darling."

Your darling?—Will thought. How long had Hannibal known this guy? *My darling*—like somehow getting railed constituted a pet name. *Fuck you.*

"Not to worry," Hannibal said, walking over to Gustav, kissing him, grabbing his ass, and taking the coffee that was offered.

Will narrowed his eyes again. He wondered if Gustav was ready to die. It seemed he was. It seemed to Will that Gustav had a death wish, and he'd chosen today.

As Hannibal sipped his coffee with egotistical glee, he leaned in beside Gustav as if this were the new normal routine, looking over at Will as though he were waiting for him to continue...whatever dumb fucking conversation was happening two seconds ago.

Both Will and Hannibal knew exactly what this was. Obviously, it was not hard to posit. When the two finally made eye contact, the look in Will's eyes was completely done. If this were a game, it was Will's turn.

"So—Gustav?" Will said, taking another sip of coffee. "What do people call you for short? Gus?"

"Yes, actually," Gustav chimed, blissfully unaware of the slight.

Will had to suppress a hard laugh. Is that what Hannibal called him during sex?

Give it to me, Gus. That's good, GUS. Fuck yes, GUUUUS.

"And I know what you're thinking—what does he call me during sex?" Gustav continued as if reading Will's thoughts. "Mostly, he calls me his boy, and I call him Daddy."

Will nearly spat out his coffee.

The vignette closed in, suffocating him. He could not breathe, nor did he want to. He suddenly felt nauseous, lightheaded and flushed, and for a second he wondered if he weren't better off dead. Those words had a fucking awful taste—disgusting. All Will could think about was how the only person who should be calling Hannibal Daddy was Will.

He put three fingers to his sternum and scratched insatiably hard.

Will would not stand for this. Not a moment longer. Once again, outdone by Hannibal's audacity, Will had to figure out a way to get back at him.

What would that involve?

Half heartbroken, feeling worthless beyond recognition, Will wanted to concede defeat and ruin everything right then. Half angry, malicious and spiteful, feeling defiant and godlike, he wanted to follow through, showing Hannibal that whatever strength he thought he was wielding, Will had a much larger man who could swing a much larger weapon.

It was clear that Hannibal expected Will to act a certain way in response to this situation. It was also clear that Will was about to act the exact opposite.

"*So*—how long have you two been an item?" Will asked, keeping a keen smile on his face.

Gustav looked at Hannibal, but Hannibal only looked at Will. His large arm dropped from the hold it had on Gus, resting gently on the counter behind them.

Hannibal became curious.

Will could see that he had gained the large man's attention.

"I wouldn't say we're an item," Gustav started, leaning into Hannibal, who was still focused on Will. "We like to have fun now and again," he finished, pressing his forehead into Hannibal's jaw.

Hannibal blinked, long and hard.

"Now and again?" Will mused, ice blue eyes perky and pretty, glinting with a smile of delight. "How interesting." His eyes darted back to Hannibal. "How long have you been *now and again*, Gus? If you don't mind me asking."

Gustav didn't mind. He didn't care. He was oblivious to the external workings of this conversation.

"*Ooh*—a month or so now—right, Han?"

Hannibal's eyes darkened as he blinked again. Will only smiled.

"Well—*Han,*" Will stated with familiar inflection, batting his eyelashes hard. "I'm just learning *so many* new things," Will stated, still so incredibly full of his own enthusiasm.

Hannibal went to say something, but Will interrupted immediately.

“You new to the area, Gus?” Will asked, finally dropping eye contact with Hannibal and making forehead contact with Gustav.

“Relatively. I’ve been here a few months.” Gustav replied.

Hannibal watched Will with an interested gaze. He cocked his head slightly, unseeable to the average eye, wondering what Will would do next.

“You should come to dinner sometime. My boyfriend Cooper lives on the Upper East. I’m sure he’d like to meet you.”

“Ooh—*I’d love it*. Han—you should cook for us, yes?”

“Yes. *Han.* You should.” Will cheesed.

Hannibal hid his displeasure well. He had not become the man he was by displaying the internal workings of his emotional and logical states, but Will knew.

And it was perfect.

“I’d be delighted to,” Hannibal responded calmly, taking another sip of coffee.

2.

“Beverly—please.”

“Will—” Her sharp tone echoed through the receiver as they spoke over the phone. “This is an insane request. You understand that, right?”

“I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t important. I need you there.”

“Why?” Bev asked, slightly drawing out the word.

“I enjoy your company,” Will replied, also drawing out the words.

“As a buffer—you enjoy my company as a buffer.”

“I haven’t met Solene. It'll be a nice evening.”

“No.” Beverly tersely replied.

“Be-ver-ly.”

Beverly stood in her apartment, eyeing Solene, who stared at her with an inquisitive brow. She had no desire to take her girlfriend, much less herself, to a dinner party with four men

who were all trying to—*she didn't know*—one-up each other on how big their dicks were. But she was also trying to look out for her friend. She still didn't know what his new boyfriend was capable of, and given the opportunity, Cooper might become poisonous rather quickly. So, she conceded, if only for Will.

She sighed heavily. *"What should I bring?"*

"Nothing. Hannibal has it covered."

"Friday night?"

"8:00 PM. And Beverly…"

"What?"

"Thank you."

THE HUNGRY HEART

COOPER KENNEDY

Hands balled into a fist, Cooper flicked his thumb from underneath his curled fingers three times, making a light snap inside the slow, jangling elevator. He squeezed hard once, cracking both knuckles, then stretched out his hands in front of him.

Even in their freshly manicured state, a hangnail sat on his left index finger. He sucked his teeth, annoyed. Bringing his curled fingers to his face, he yanked the spiny piece of flesh from the crease and flicked it away.

That woman—the manicurist he saw earlier in the day—would lose her job tomorrow. Cooper didn't dole out $350 for hand and foot services just to have a hang-nail mere moments before the party he'd groomed for. If that manicurist couldn't perform her job, she didn't deserve one. Someone had to make up for this. Tomorrow it would be—whatever her name was.

He interlaced his hands in front of him and impatiently waited for that godforsaken lift to reach Will's apartment. Inside the small gold frame, the floor number scrolled passed the two with a chime and suddenly froze just as three entered the frame. The elevator stalled abruptly, jerking and jostling heavily, forcing Cooper to brace himself against the wall.

He looked up and around, listening for a cable snap or rail creak, hand hovering over the emergency brake should he need to use it. He waited for nearly a minute, holding steady, and when no further movement lurched through the metal, Cooper checked the golden gate.

The door lock had come unlatched mid-ride—again.

This happened almost every single time Cooper rode up that wretched elevator. It was more of a pain in the ass than a terrifying experience, except when Will was with him. Those stalls always made Cooper's heart lurch, and he would grab his boyfriend—as if it would do anything at all—hoping they wouldn't plummet to the basement.

Cooper leaned into the door, holding the lock in place, pressing the fourth-floor button at the same time. The elevator started ascending once more, squealing like a dying cat. Cooper sighed hard, finally able to let go.

That goddamn lift. That goddamn gate.

Whenever they road up together, Cooper had to close the door for Will, and even then, he had to use the entire force of his large body to slide it down the rudder. He had no idea how that little man managed to close it by himself.

Honestly, Cooper wasn't sure how Will did anything without him, meekly walking around the world with a million different weird quirks that invited all sorts of hell.

Living in a dilapidated building was only one example.

It was awful—falling apart at the seams. That gaudy red wallpaper in the lobby was peeling up at almost every corner, and Will said he called the handyman to fix it, but they would glue it down only to have it pop back up several days later. Cooper couldn't understand why Will continued to deal with these headaches when he didn't have to.

On more than one occasion, Cooper had asked Will to move in with him only to have Will refuse each time.

Frankly, it was insulting that Will hadn't enthusiastically agreed the first time. Cooper had gone out on a limb, opened up his space, and said *I love you*. Will had no idea how infrequently Cooper used those words—how much of a gift they were. Maybe if the young man had known—valued the words as he should have—he would have reciprocated.

It was a problem they needed to work on. Will didn't understand how full his life could be. If Will would do what was expected of him and allow Cooper to take care of him, there would be far less worry and far fewer headaches.

Will needed it.

They both needed it.

Right now, Cooper was working on the case of his life. A state senator was recently brought up on eight counts of murder—strangulating young men and women while he had sex with them—and if won, Caldwell Kennedy Berkshire & Reed was in line to be the largest firm in New York City.

This case would make his career, which was already a glistening golden nugget among his peers. He had to maintain his status, if nothing else, and stressors in his relationship were not something Cooper wanted or needed right now. The case would last another year, at the very least, and he just needed to know Will was dedicated to their mutual progress.

Sometimes it didn't seem so.

Some days, like today, it was only an added annoyance that Will did things without consulting him, such as hosting a dinner party with another man in their shared apartment, inviting a handful of less than desirable guests.

The elevator made it to the fourth floor—*finally*—and Cooper yanked open the gate, using his duplicate keyset to enter the apartment. Three keys instead of key codes.

Yeah, he'd get Will out of here as soon as possible.

He entered the house to find Will waiting for him in the foyer—soft sweet curls across his forehead, glacier eyes sparkling like frost in the sun. Cooper smiled wide. He loved Will

more than he could stand. Maddening and passionate, often frustrating, it was all-consuming. Sometimes, his love for that boy made him crazy.

“Hey, baby,” He said scooping Will up as always, taking him from the floor and filling his arms, pressing his mouth firmly against those soft pink lips. His breath was hinted with whiskey, his body smelling of cherry blossom.

“Hey, Coop,” Will replied as he pulled away from the kiss, shyly pushing out of the embrace.

Cooper kissed him one more time, then released him to the floor, stepping back to admire the younger man’s outfit.

“I thought you were gonna wear the Gucci sweater I picked out,” He said, pinching at the sleeve of Will’s grey sweater.

“I decided to wear this,” Will replied, rather brusque.

“Yeah—I can see that. Now we don’t match.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Cooper.”

“What? I’m just trying to look put together, is all.”

“There’s only six people, Coop. I’ll wear the Gucci one to a bigger event.”

“Yeah, you better,” Cooper said, half-joking, half stoutly sincere, patting Will’s ass and kissing his cheek.

As expected, the second host was quick to enter.

“Mr. Kennedy,” Lecter said, walking out of the kitchen, sleeves of his white oxford rolled to the elbow, apron dawned like some sort of housewife.

“Lecter, good to see you,” Cooper said, shaking the man’s hand. Maybe it wasn’t how he usually acted at parties—ever the charming socialite—but there was no way in hell Cooper was about to tell Hannibal Lecter to call him Coop. That was for people he was trying to impress with his approachability. He had no desire to impress nor seem approachable to Lecter.

However, Will was polite enough for both of them.

“You can call him Cooper, Hannibal,” Will said. “We all know each other well enough.”

“You hear that, Lecter,” Cooper quipped with a smile, squeezing Will into his side. “My baby is as sweet as a peach. He can’t help himself.”

“Will can be incredibly courteous when he chooses to be,” Lecter’s stoic face wore a gentle grin, seemingly unaffected by the performance. “Can I offer you a drink, Cooper?”

“Yeah,” Cooper replied, smile fizzling as he sucked his teeth, “I’ll take a vodka tonic if you have Belvedere.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said with a soft nod, then looked to Will, who nodded in return, silently affirming an already known drink order. “Back in a moment.” Hannibal finished, walking from the room.

Cooper narrowed his eyes as he watched Lecter exit. He didn’t appreciate that Lecter and Will could have a silent exchange, no matter how brief. Cooper didn’t like anything about tonight’s party. He would have preferred to play host for this little soiree where all telepathic conversations were limited to Cooper and Will—the actual couple.

Will led Cooper into the living room by the fingers, dropping them upon arrival, and went to start the record player.

“I don’t know why we couldn’t have this at my place,” Cooper said in a sigh, sitting down on the arm of the couch, not comfortable enough to settle anywhere else.

Will slid a vinyl from its sleeve and placed it on the platter. “Your place looks like a sex dungeon, Cooper,” he mumbled as he adjusted the arm and soft music began to play.

“If you’d move in, it *would be* a sex dungeon,” Cooper said with a coy smile, reaching over to take two handfuls of Will’s ass and pull the smaller man between his legs.

Will looked at his boyfriend rather seriously, hands listlessly resting on Cooper’s broad arms. “If I moved in, you’d want me to move out a day later.”

“That’s not true,” Cooper replied with a smile, tucking his chin back in feigned shock. “I love all your little—*eccentricities*.”

Despite his many faults, Cooper knew Will was the perfect guy for him. The pretty young man was supple and receptive with the sweetest tendencies in the world. *And fucking hell*, did he have a nice fucking ass. Everyone and their brother thought so. The couple was complimented left and right everywhere they went, fawned over with vocalized adoration. They belonged together, and Cooper did his best to ensure the world knew that.

Will didn’t respond to the topic at hand, but that was fine by Cooper, far too distracted by his boyfriend putting both arms around his neck and kissing him softly. Just as Hannibal re-entered the room, drinks in hand, Will pulled away, but Cooper made one final, possessive grope of both plump cheeks.

“Here you are,” Hannibal said, pleasantly passing Cooper his vodka and Will his whiskey. And of course, without fail, he immediately drew Will away. “If you’d be so kind, Will, I require your assistance in the kitchen.”

“Alright,” Will agreed. “Be right back,” he said to Cooper, kissing him on the cheek and following Hannibal into the other room.

Well, that certainly wasn’t going to happen—not without a witness.

It didn't matter that they were a wall's width away. Every extended period of physical separation—no matter how small—was steeped in compulsive worry. It wasn't that he didn't trust Will. He did, for the most part. Lecter, on the other hand, was possessive, clingy, and had some weird hold on Will that always seemed to cross every relationship boundary in the book. Moreover, it was blatantly obvious that Lecter was in love with Will. That was a problem for Cooper—a big problem.

A situation like that had temptation lurking around every corner, so to prevent Hannibal from saying or doing something he shouldn't, Cooper worked hard to witness every interaction. If it were up to him, the two men would never be left alone together.

He stood up slowly and paced into the kitchen behind Will and Hannibal, taking a quiet seat at the kitchen island like a patron entering a theatre.

Subtly, his eyes darted between the two men standing next to each other at the stove, watching their bodies and reading their lips while they conversed beneath the sounds of sizzling pans and clamoring dishes.

No intimate chatting occurred. Mostly it was *'stir this'* or *'chop that'* or *'get that thing from the cabinet.'* The two men worked around each other with near-perfect precision, rarely making eye contact, hardly ever touching—a practice that looked almost rehearsed.

On the surface, it was all innocent enough.

But something sat far deeper than the superficial conversations, touches, and looks. Underneath, an impenetrable space existed.

Cooper watched Will and Hannibal talk, pleasant and respectful, despite how he had heard them fight. He watched the physical ease, the fluidity of their interactions, and it created a world—one far below Cooper's—that excluded him entirely.

A chain of sensations followed Cooper Kennedy's feeling of otherness—a habitual domino effect. Taught to him over time, instilled through his father's example, sadness no longer sat as a solitary emotion. When pain crept in, it was always accompanied by the desperate need to have that pain subside. Fearful that he would suffer forever, Cooper learned to adopt anger and violence to combat the growing sensation of loneliness.

That evening, sitting inside that kitchen in Williamsburg, Cooper Kennedy beat sadness back into submission with a single resolution—the world Will and Hannibal shared would be his, or everyone inside it would burn.

GUSTAV ROSANDER

Gustav patiently watched the floor numbers change, standing with one hand in his pocket, the other wrapped around a heavy wine bottle. His body was calm—steady—all nerves

contained. He had managed to maintain that disposition the entire day. Even when the tiny hummingbird of excitement fluttered up his throat and threatened to fly, he swallowed softly, putting away any anticipation or expectation.

Tonight, he wouldn't allow his hopes to outweigh his rationality. He wouldn't dive into the deep end—not this time—not like he always did.

He sent his fingers underneath the lip of his sweater, pulling out and adjusting a thin gold chain, chin tucked to ensure it was neatly displayed. The small glistening line reflected in the dim elevator lights, starkly contrasting against the black fabric.

Perfect.

It was an odd occurrence for Hannibal to participate in anything resembling conventional courtship. In the brief time they'd known each other, Hannibal and Gustav had gone to dinner exactly once. The remaining bulk of their relationship consisted of a handful of late-night rendezvous at Gustav's apartment in Soho.

At this point, a token of affection was completely unheard of. But sure enough, that morning, a small blue box arrived at Gustav's doorstep with the delicate jewelry inside, a very affectionate note inscribed:

-From Han

When they met at the New York City Ballet several months ago, they were introduced by a friend of a friend, and Hannibal Lecter had been above and beyond Gustav's type. He was a man that most people only dreamt of and a man—Gus thought—was far out of his league. So when Hannibal approached him, the opportunity presented itself, and Gustav wasn't about to say no.

The truth was, Gustav said *no* to very little. *No* was a word for those who didn't seek an exciting life full of new experiences, and Gustav had quite a long list of *new* experiences.

Hannibal Lecter was a new experience, to say the least. Especially in the bedroom.

Hannibal liked to fuck Gus from behind while looking at pictures on his phone. Sure, it was odd, but he'd met weirder guys with weirder kinks. If Han wanted to watch porn while they fucked, Gustav didn't mind, so long as they both had a good time...and Gustav always had a good time.

It wasn't uncommon for Gustav to have a hot and heavy fling. They came and went without much thought or feeling. However, with Hannibal, Gustav was having a hard time remaining detached.

Devilishly handsome, incredibly intelligent, and seductively charming, Hannibal had everything Gustav wanted in a partner, including a mysterious void that begged for someone to fill it.

If only it could be Gustav.

Maybe tonight—meeting Hannibal's friends—was an indication that there was more to the relationship. Perhaps his hopes weren't false ones. Thinking about it sent another bird fluttering up his chest, and he swallowed again.

He raised his arm, bringing his face to his armpit, sniffed twice, then cupped a hand over his mouth and huffed.

All clear. He smelled perfect.

The elevator reached the top floor without a hitch, and as soon as it chimed, Will opened the front door.

"Hey, Gus," He said, reaching down to open the golden gate.

It didn't open, not even after several forceful yanks. Gustav took hold of the other side and helped until the lock released, skidding across the rudders in a screech. They sheepishly exchanged smiles.

"Sorry about that."

"What's wrong with it?" Gus asked, exiting the carriage with a look backward.

"It's old—and finicky," Will said, closing the door and offering Gustav a handshake.

"I got this for Hannibal," Gus replied with a smile, holding up a bottle of expensive yet poorly chosen white wine. "Where—is he?" He asked, head on a swivel, fingers tapping against the glass bottle.

"He's in the kitchen," Will said, extending his arm to lead the way.

Gus smiled and followed Will into the kitchen where Hannibal stood, meticulously focused on his cooking. He only glanced up when he was loudly beckoned.

"Han!"

Gus went to Hannibal's side, where they shared a quick kiss.

Will stood for a moment as the image of Gustav and Hannibal together weighed down the progression of time. He watched Hannibal's fingers take up under the thin gold chain around Gustav's neck, admiring it while they exchanged brief words and smiled.

"It looks lovely on you," Hannibal said as he continued stirring the contents of his pan.

Will blinked a few times. He didn't know that the two were in the gift-giving phase of their relationship. Up until that point, Will didn't know that it was serious enough to constitute such tokens. His awareness dropped to his arm, feeling the cold semi-heavy metal that wrapped around it. He shook his wrist, dislodging the Rolex plastered to his skin until it dangled loosely against his thumb knuckle.

Items of ownership.

Suddenly Will hated the chain around Gustav's neck, and worse, he suddenly hated the watch around his wrist, something he loved only moments ago.

"Um—Gustav?" Will called.

"Yes?"

"This is Cooper Kennedy, my boyfriend. Cooper, this is Gustav Rosander."

"Gustav, a pleasure," Cooper said, reaching across the island to shake the man's hand.

"Call me Gus," Gus said, eyes tracing over all the emphasized surfaces of the broad man's body. He nudged Will's elbow. "My goodness, Will. Where did you find him?"

Cooper smiled brightly, displaying his pearly white teeth as he raked a hand through his thick golden-brown hair.

"Actually," Cooper chuckled, "I did all the finding—didn't I, baby?"

"Uh, yeah—yeah," Will replied, walking to the liquor cabinet. "Gus? A drink?"

"Wine, please," Gus replied, not turning to Will, eyes still on Cooper. Cooper seemed to enjoy the favor even if he didn't reciprocate it. "So—where does one go to be found by a man like you, Cooper Kennedy?"

Will brought Gustav his wine, and before he could head back to help Hannibal with the food preparations, Cooper's large arms snatched him, pulling him to sit halfway on his lap.

Gustav watched Will take a long blink.

"A flower shop outside Dumbo." Cooper started. "He was picking out flowers for someone else. Luckily, I got to him before he had the chance."

"Uh-huh," Will passively muttered, eyes peering over at Hannibal, who did not turn from the stove.

"If I hadn't snatched him up, we might not be in each other's arms right now," Cooper added, burrowing his nose into the side of Will's face.

Cooper was clearly smitten with Will.

Will was clearly distracted.

"Tonight would be much different if you hadn't, Coop," Will said, slightly indifferent, patting his boyfriend once on the knee before standing up again. He returned to help Hannibal once more.

Gustav took his wine and sat down next to Cooper. They chatted casually while watching their significant others toddle away in the kitchen.

Somewhere inside the commotion, there was a pause. Gustav suddenly found himself sitting inside a second of insight, looking back and forth between Cooper Kennedy and Hannibal Lecter, taking in the moment as well as the moments that preceded it.

Will Graham was a handsome young man, true enough, but Gustav was having trouble figuring out how he ended up as the rope in a never-ending tug of war between these two men.

Will was in a relationship with Cooper, but the young man was constantly drawn back to Hannibal's side like a magnet—some unknown pulling force.

Gustav noticed something that probably not many people did, possibly not even the two men involved. He saw how Will and Hannibal touched each other—how Will's fingertips would tickle Hannibal's elbow when he needed him to pay attention to something—how those same fingers softly re-fastened the strings of Hannibal's apron and then pressed into the large man's low back.

Typically, Gustav had a tenderness for that type of affection, something he rarely saw amongst American men, a simplicity yet specificity to the way touch was initiated, even between friends.

But this wasn't typical.

He watched Will and Hannibal float around each other like partners in a tantalizing dance, and he had to wonder if there wasn't more than friendship involved.

Gustav enjoyed Hannibal's company and, even more, how he and Hannibal made love. It was fleeting and ravenous, their relationship, and Gustav previously understood that it may never amount to anything more than that. He was trying hard to sequester his tendency to fall hard and fast, but something about the relationship he witnessed between Will and Han drove him to want more.

He coveted that intimacy simply because he had never seen anything like it. It was both illustrious and enticing, and that night, fearing someone else might take it if he didn't, Gustav decided to try and make Hannibal his—officially.

BEVERLY KATZ

"Doc!?" Beverly beckoned into the apartment, walking out of the elevator with Solene behind her.

Will popped his head around the corner. "Beverly?" He said, fully entering the hall. "How did you get in?"

"You buzzed me in, Doc."

“No. I mean—how did you open the lift gate?”

Beverly looked at Solene for a second with furrowed brow, then back at Will. “I just pulled it open.” She said, dropping her leather jacket from her shoulders.

“I only ask cause we’ve been having trouble with it all night.” Will said, “Even Cooper had trouble.”

“Oh,” Beverly hung her jacket. “No, it just slid right open.” She returned to stand next to her girlfriend. “Will Graham, this is Solene Saide. Sol, this is Will.”

Solene was nothing less than her namesake. She burned with radiance, her smile filling the corners of Will’s heart. Broad-shouldered, height comparable to Will’s, her muscular arms protruded through her ribbed white blouse, one wrist covered in dangling gold bracelets.

Will accepted her handshake, feeling the radiant heat of her textured satin skin offer not just a greeting, but safety and friendship.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Sol.”

“Beverly can’t stop raving about you, Will. She’s infected me with her love for you.”

“Oh, hell,” Will chuckled. “Well, thank you,” he said bashfully, smiling at the compliment. “Can I get you two something to drink?” He asked, escorting them to the living room where the other guests had ended their migration and sat.

“A beer for me,” Bev said.

“Wine, if you have it.” Sol followed.

“Hannibal is about to serve the hors d'oeuvres,” Will said, then quickly made introductions. “Beverly, Solene—this is Gustav—Hannibal’s plus one, and Solene, this is my boyfriend, Cooper.”

Will went to walk from the room, and Beverly quickly grabbed his belt loop, stopping him in his tracks. She looked at him with a firm yet steady gaze and mouthed *NO* as subtly as she could.

“I’ll grab the drinks and be right back,” he said casually.

Beverly put both hands in her pockets with a smile, then walked to the couch and sat down beside her girlfriend. While Sol seemed the picture of relaxation, ankle laid across her knee, arm draped over the back of the sofa, Beverly couldn’t bring herself to that type of ease, not even with Sol beside her. She sat forward, elbows on her knees, flat hands pressed together. Thankfully, there was less than a millisecond of silence before Gustav spoke.

“Beverly, yes?”

“Yes.” Beverly smiled, looking over at Gustav.

“How long have you known Will and Hannibal?” He asked, light and effortless in how he engaged in the conversation.

Bev was about to answer, but her eyes were abruptly taken from their place when Cooper huffed rather loudly, shaking his hanging head. She watched as he raised his eyes again, face marked with sarcastic amusement.

Few may have understood the mannerism, but Beverly knew Cooper did not like those two names sitting together. She knew the look. It was the same disapproving glare Cooper used on her—a scoffing insult for breaking an imaginary set of Cooper Kennedy rules.

Beverly was tempted to address it but decided instead to ignore him and reply to Gustav.

“Will and I work together at the shipyard, so I’ve known him—I guess it’ll be a year this summer.” She supposed, looking at Sol, who affirmed the accuracy with a nod, then continued. “I only know Hannibal because they’re roommates.”

“Yeah, Han said they lived together about a year.” Gustav agreed.

“Right. I met Will shortly after they moved here, but Will’s been friends with Hannibal for a while—before I knew them.”

“How long were they friends before they moved up here, do you know?” Cooper asked Beverly, trying to seem unintentional—only mildly inquisitive—by staring down into his drink.

“I don’t know, Cooper. That would be a question for Will.” Beverly replied, sure of herself but not mean like she wanted to be.

Almost on cue, Will re-entered the room, drinks in hand.

“Perfect timing,” Bev said.

“What’d I miss?” Will doled out the beverages and sat in the chair next to Cooper.

“Cooper was just wondering how long you and Hannibal were friends before you moved to New York,” Beverly explained.

Will picked up his whiskey and shrugged. “Few years, I guess,” He was quick and evasive, clearly trying to avoid the topic with a specific lack of description, hoping that would stop it altogether.

No one except for Beverly heard the desire for a redirect. Unfortunately, Gustav spoke before Bev had the chance.

“And how did you two meet—you and Han?” Gustav asked Will.

Now, Beverly didn’t know much, but she knew Will was a private guy. He was always reserved about divulging details of his past. She knew Will might deflect that question, but

before a breath was taken—before Will had any opportunity to speak—Hannibal strode in from the kitchen with a tray full of food.

“I was his psychiatrist,” He stated freely, a soft tone of amusement turning up the ends of his mouth.

“What?” Cooper exclaimed, looking over at his boyfriend with a furrowed brow.

fuckingchrist

Will signed hard, sinking his elbows into his knees and wiping his face with both hands. His chin and lips rested inside his folded fingers, taking an exasperated breath, then made introductions, trying to continue with some semblance of etiquette even though it was clear he was thoroughly perturbed.

“Hannibal, this is Solene, Beverly’s girlfriend.”

Solene stood up and greeted Hannibal, taking a sampling of food, all the pleasantries intact. She was good at this, though—turning awkward situations into pleasant ones—and that fact was what Beverly had been relying on for tonight’s dinner.

“Wow—*how scandalous*,” Sol joked, winking at Will as she sat back down. “I see my therapist once a week, and sometimes that’s too much. How did a friendship blossom for you two?”

Cooper, however, was about as pleasant as a 3rd-degree burn. “Yeah, Will. How did friendship *blossom*?” He jabbed. “Did it *blossom* during your sessions?”

Hannibal continued to serve their guests as if he hadn’t just thrown a live grenade into the conversation.

“We realized we weren’t a good fit as doctor and patient,” Will said, looking into his glass before knocking back the whole damn thing.

“Too much in common?” Sol asked.

“I guess you could say that.”

“I’ve heard of that happening.” Beverly offered, trying to diffuse the tension. “It’s pretty common, I think.”

“*Pretty unorthodox* if you ask me,” Cooper added. “Can’t you have your license revoked for that kind of thing, Lecter?”

“There are no rules in psychiatric practice that prevent camaraderie, I assure you.” Hannibal clarified, setting the tray on the buffet cabinet and returning to the group, wine glass in hand.

“You wouldn’t consider it a bit unethical, Han?” Gustav asked, putting his hand on the large man’s back as he sat down.

“It would only be considered unethical if I continued to use my intimate knowledge of Will as a means of manipulation,” Hannibal answered, drawing a wine glass to his lips and sipping lightly.

“Are you?” Beverly chuckled softly, looking at Hannibal.

“Am I—?” Hannibal inquired.

“Ever unethical.”

“Great question, Beverly,” Cooper interjected with a snap. “Ever use your intimate knowledge to manipulate Will?”

Will and Hannibal glanced at each other for less than a second.

“Trust me. He’s tried.” Will joked, finalizing the severity with jest, “but despite his best efforts, I still smoke inside and refuse to do the dishes.”

Beverly laughed with the rest of them, but she felt no humor at all. She knew that conversation—every single word—was an absolute bogus lie. No, she didn’t know the truth, but she knew dishonesty when she heard it.

What made it worse was that everyone could see it was a lie, despite how they disregarded it—everyone, that is, except for Cooper, who took it as a challenge.

THE MAIN COURSE

The dinner table was elegantly set for the occasion, the perfect blend of extravagance and simplicity. Eucalyptus and white lilies decorated an emerald table runner, littered with white votives inside glass vases etched in gold filigree. The space was warm and inviting, filled to the brim with soft ambient music and low flickering light. Every guest took their respective seats—Hannibal at the head, Gustav and Solene to his right, Will and Cooper to his left, Beverly taking up the end—and even the decor was not enough to fight the frosty tension.

After a relatively peaceful first course of spiced oysters in sabayon topped in Sturgeon Caviar, chased with a citrus white wine, tongues loosened and shoulders dropped. Everyone began expressing themselves with increased candor, which was not a positive addition to the evening’s atmosphere.

Rack of lamb with seared sweetbreads, or so Hannibal described it, came served on white porcelain plates, presenting itself as the main course for the most depraved and delicious dinner those six individuals would ever experience.

Cooper had been heating around the collar for far too long. Left to his mental devices, he had worked himself up until a spiteful mood that hid just beneath his socially trained exterior.

After deciding that egos were the simplest way to politely yet detrimentally injure, he chose Hannibal as the center of his belittlement, starting with his choice of boyfriend.

“So, Gus,” He said, slicing into his dish. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a barber,”

“*A barber?*” Will perked up, eyes darting from Gustav to Hannibal. That tidbit was highly unexpected but also thoroughly amusing. “Interesting.” He said over a bite from his fork.

“It is, in fact, rather fascinating.” Hannibal replied, peering down at his plate while working into his entree, “Among the first barbers were priests and medicine men. The cutting and grooming of a man’s hair constituted a religious experience—sacred in nature.”

“*Wow*, Hannibal,” Sol added. “You are full of fun information.”

“He’s always saying things like that,” Gus said, smiling adoringly and rubbing Hannibal’s arm.

Will glared—hard—suddenly heating to his own simmering temperature.

Will felt that Gus didn’t really know that Hannibal was *always saying things like that* because he imagined that Gus and Hannibal rarely had conversations outside the exchange of elongated vowel sounds.

“It’s funny,” Will said, pausing for a sip of wine. “Hannibal doesn’t usually go in for that type.” As he finished, he felt Cooper drape his arm across the back of his chair, uncertain if it was a supportive or reprimanding gesture.

“Oh no?” Gustav replied, hearing the slight. It poked at every insecurity he had, and he grew possessive over whatever flimsy relationship status he had with the man next to him. He sucked something from his molar and smiled. “What type does he usually go for? Mechanics?”

Beverly choked on a swallow, coughing hard, reaching desperately for her water.

Will met Gustav’s eye line, refusing to break.

Solene jumped in like a conductor yanking on the break of a runaway train. “Is that how you met?” She asked. “Do you cut Hannibal’s hair?”

Gustav dropped Will’s gaze but did not let go of his intention.

“Oh, *clearly not*,” Gus joked, setting down his fork so he could run his fingers through Hannibal’s hair. “Look at this mop.”

Hannibal had let his hair grow longer, not below his jawline, but longer than Will had previously seen. The silver locks were often swept back, beautiful when several strands fell to his face, and Will thought it was handsome.

Gustav, a slightly more insightful person than the average slut Hannibal regularly enjoyed, knew this. He decided to use it as his first display of ownership.

“I keep telling him I am going to chop it all off one day. Perhaps taper the sides.” He continued, fingers stroking Hannibal’s head. “What do you think, Will?”

What did Will think? Great question. Will thought that Gustav should shut the fuck up. Will thought he should mind his own business, should stop touching Hannibal’s arm, running his fingers through Hannibal’s hair like he was some sort of pet, maybe drop dead from a heart attack, Will, at this point, did not care.

Hannibal was intentionally indifferent. He just sat there, letting this guy say whatever the fuck he wanted to—rude or irritating—when previously he would never let that fly unattended. Each allowance was meant to fuel the green fire of Will’s jealous anger, and even though it was working exceedingly well, Will saw and countered the move.

“Maybe shave it all off.” Will jousted. “Look like an escaped convict.” He said, leaning into the crook of Cooper's draped arm.

“You would have to shave yours to match,” Hannibal retorted with a smile.

“*Ah, jesus*—no way,” Cooper said, raking his fingers through Will’s soft brown curls, to which Will made a very obvious eye flutter. “I love this hair.” He finished, grabbing a handful and playfully shaking Will’s head. Will leaned his face up and kissed Cooper softly.

That won Will a hard, hateful stare from both Hannibal and his little boy toy.

Beverly downed the last of her wine in one swallow, and Solene quickly refilled both of their glasses, her wide eyes staring at the table as she poured.

This daytime reality tv show of a dinner party was growing more and more fascinating by the minute. Given enough time, these four men would be clawing at each other’s throats. Bev took her wine in hand, and she and Sol leaned back in their chairs, sitting silently as if they were turning the volume up to hear every gory word.

“You’re a lawyer, Cooper, yes?” Gustav asked.

“Right.”

“What type of law?” Hannibal asked like he didn't already know.

“Cooper is a criminal defense lawyer. His latest case is representing Charles Lichtman,” Will stated with authority.

“The senator?”

“That’s right,” Cooper answered, chewing over a mouthful.

“He rapes children, doesn’t he?” Gustav asked casually.

The table silenced, utensils clanking loudly. Cooper took his wine with a smile and a laugh, dealing with more than his fair share of political bleeding hearts. “Only if the eyes of the law see it that way.” He said with a sip, eyes looking directly at Gustav.

“Well, he either does or he doesn’t,” Gustav replied, gesturing his hand over the words.

“You don’t have to agree with the justice system in order for the justice system to work,” Cooper said.

“One could argue the justice system operates in tandem with other influential yet corrupt facets. Blind—they see what they’re told to see.” Hannibal replied.

“Unfortunately, it’s not always that cut and dry. It’s fun to think that way—pretend you see the truth when the law doesn’t—but there is a lot about these cases that the public doesn’t know,” Cooper said, actually very convincing in the way he spoke—a professional in his field.

“Cooper has cultivated his reputation and notoriety over the years by giving voice to misunderstood men,” Will added, playing his part well.

Hannibal was irritated.

Will could tell because Hannibal’s knife scraped against the porcelain plate—a fumble that was exceedingly rare, but also, incredibly telling.

“A great deal of responsibility is attached to your profession,” Hannibal said to Cooper. “Speaking on behalf of the misunderstood garners power and influence, and that’s something most individuals would abuse.”

“Abuse is a subjective term,” Cooper replied, dressed in his most suave lawyer voice. “Power and influence are earned—given to those who have proven themselves worthy of it. If that has been bestowed on me, or any other for that matter, it grants certain rights to governance.”

“You believe yourself ordained with such abilities, and therefore the right to manipulate what people perceive as fact or fiction?” Hannibal asked, working to draw out Cooper’s true nature.

“I’m not ashamed to say so. It affords me the opportunity to prevent evil institutions—or individuals—from snatching up the things that don’t belong to them.” Cooper said, addressing the undertone of the conversation, narrowing down with specificity the one thing he knew Hannibal was talking about.

“You use your powers for what you believe to be the good of mankind,” Hannibal said with a mocking smile.

“I protect what I need to with the resources I have.” Cooper shot back.

Hannibal and Cooper looked at each other, then into each other, neither scared of the opposing man. Both men knew they were no longer talking about the interworkings of the law. Cooper was insinuating he had divine ownership of a treasured possession, protected by

wealth, power, and connection. Should that be the case, Hannibal was prepared to raise the dominion of hell to prove the man was wrong.

Gustav was keen. The long slithering trail of this conversation had confusing bends and breaks. However, he knew who they were talking about. Eager to diminish the beaming light that drew in these large and handsome moths, Gustav worked to reveal any and all of Will's flaws—meagerly succeeding.

“How long have you been practicing law?” He asked Cooper after several moments of silence.

“Fifteen years.”

“Fifteen?” Gustav said with raised eyebrows, sucking at his molar again. “There is quite an age gap between you two then, yes?” He asked, subtly shifting his pointed index finger between Will and Cooper.

“Ah—not any more than you and the old man here,” Cooper said with a smarmy smile, pointing his knife at Hannibal.

Gus looked at Hannibal and then over to Will, ignoring Cooper entirely. “It seems you also have a type, I think, Will. The older wealthy type,” he said.

Cooper grew heated, resting his elbows on the table and rubbing his hands together. “Maybe Will knows a good thing when he sees it.” He said tersely.

“I didn’t mean it as an insult,” Gus chuckled with a shrug.

“Then how did you mean it?” Cooper retorted.

“It seems we are the subject of scrutiny, Mr. Kennedy,” Hannibal interjected with a calm and rational smile, meeting Cooper’s gaze. “We both appreciate young, beautiful men and are chastised for it.”

Cooper put his tongue to his cheek and huffed again, not interested in Hannibal taking up for him, or Will, but trying to refrain from being obviously rude.

“And you both have excellent taste if you ask me,” Beverly finally chimed in.

Cooper leaned back in his chair, following the diffusion but still intent on having the last word. “Well—you can’t help who you love, can you, Lecter?” He said, pushing his plate away, taking Will’s hand, and kissing the top.

“I’d have to agree with you, Cooper,” Hannibal replied. “True love has an insidious way of getting exactly what it wants.”

“True love isn’t insidious at all,” Will inserted, looking down at the rim of his wine glass, then cautiously eyeing Hannibal under his brow.

“All love has harmful side effects, Will,” Hannibal replied. “I’m sure your love for Cooper is pure, but we are all fools in love.”

Will and Cooper both glared at Hannibal—each experienced very different things.

Will felt a tremendous rush fill his chest, a waterfall of emotion that nearly drowned him. He would never understand how Hannibal could say so many things all at once like that—professing his own love, apologizing for that love and its consequences, insulting whatever approximation of ‘love’ that existed between Will and Cooper, then subtly comparing himself to Cooper, claiming himself the more devout man.

It was—*elegant*.

Will’s heart began to thud. It pounded so hard inside his chest he felt confident it was audible to everyone at the table.

He knew what Cooper would assume from the comment, and it drew adrenaline up his spine, heightening every sense. He could feel Cooper’s body heat beside him, the cracking of his thumb knuckles as his fists clenched, his muscles tightened over his bones.

The words were there, and Cooper was about to speak them.

“I guess that’s true, Lecter,” Cooper said, now severely determined. “Our love is pure and foolish, which is why Will and I have decided to move in together,” He announced with a bright, unnatural smile.

The table silenced again.

“*What?”* Beverly and Solene said, almost in unison.

Hannibal looked only at Will. “When was this decision made?” He asked.

“Tonight, actually,” Cooper said, leaning in to kiss Will, taking his left hand and visibly fiddling with the ring finger. “I asked, and Will said yes. We decided we can't live without each other any longer.”

Will knew he couldn’t verbally say it wasn’t the truth, nor could he shake his head when Beverly looked at him with a worried face.

Cooper was asserting his dominance without permission or consensus, just as Will had hoped. Unbeknownst to everyone, Will had accurately predicted the night would get to this point.

Perhaps he wasn’t fully conscious of the fact.

Still, his sternum was now scraped raw from where he’d been scratching, the itching crawling up to his clavicle, spreading down his arms, and though it often exacerbated the issued, the way Hannibal looked at him upon hearing the news sent overwhelming relief coursing through every vein in Will’s body. It felt just like his dream, shedding his uncomfortable skin strip by strip.

Some part of him, the framework beneath the flesh, was now visible, and he relished that fact. Will was peeling up the frayed edge, tempting the entire tapestry to fall.

Come out, come out, wherever you are.

“Congratulations, you two! That’s such a big step.” Gus said, raising his glass to toast them.

Everyone followed suit with supportive words, but not one person—except for Gustav, who was more than delighted to have Will out of the way—meant the things they said.

“What’s next for you two? Do I hear wedding bells?” Gus said, winking at Will, a sinister glint behind the joy.

“*No—no*. We’re not anywhere close to that.” Will firmly asserted.

“*Eh*—closer than you think,” Cooper added.

Hannibal was having no more of this. He stood abruptly, sliding back his chair in a squeaky scrape. “Will—do you mind helping me clear?” He asked while he collected a few dishes.

Will said nothing, simply slid back his chair, collected a few plates, and followed Hannibal out.

Stepping over the threshold—exiting the party and entering their kitchen—was like stepping into an isolation chamber. All external sounds dampened. The unbearably high pressure dropped. No itching nor burning, no discomfort or nagging. Will walked into a space where only he and Hannibal existed, and for a moment, it made him happy.

He met Hannibal at the sink, letting the plates float down into the soapy water contained within the ceramic. Will and Hannibal stared at the backsplash, listened to each other’s heavy inhales and exhales, then turned to face each other, eyes locking, dusty blue meeting maroon.

“What is this, Will?” Hannibal asked, voice soft and sensitive. “What’s happened?”

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, “I knew he was going to do something like this,”

Hannibal cocked his head, forehead made of stone. “You knew, and you allowed it?”

“Well, I didn’t know for sure,” Will admitted. “I was mildly certain.”

“And you constructed this scenario to what end?”

Will took a moment for their lungs to refill and empty, hearing the euphoria of his heavily beating heart. He looked up at Hannibal with begging eyes, huffing through almost inaudible breath,

“I wanted to see what would happen,”

Hannibal took a commanding step forward, sending his fingertips across Will’s belly.

“Do you recall the last time you played such games?" Hannibal asked chin raised with authority, dark eyes peering down his nose. "Did you enjoy how it ended?”

Will let his body stall in the blissful state of Hannibal’s returned touch. Steady in his gaze, firm in his feet, he found elation crawl up from the earth, into his body, and evaporate out of his skin. He wanted Hannibal to fuck him right then, detailing every second of that night in Hannibal’s Baltimore kitchen.

Will grabbed Hannibal’s wrist and uttered “*Yes*,” restraining his desire to send Hannibal’s hand down to his growing erection.

“Hey!”

Both men immediately dropped from each other’s touch. They looked over to find Cooper standing in the doorway, both hands full of dishes.

“What the fuck’s going on?” Cooper asked, voice harsh.

“Cooper, allow me to take those from you,” Hannibal said, walking over to take the dirty plates. “Will isn’t feeling well, I’m afraid. He’ll need attending to.”

“Uh-huh,” Cooper grunted, eyes shifting from Hannibal to Will, drawing his tongue over his tight lips. “Can I see you in the bedroom?” He said, walking over to pull aggressively at Will’s elbow.

“Actually—”

“*Now*.” Cooper yanked Will from the kitchen, through the living room, and shoved him down the hallway.

Beverly and Sol, who had just entered the living room, immediately looked at each other.

Cooper opened the bedroom door, flung Will inside, then slammed it behind him.

“What the fuck was that, Will?”

“What?” Will said, remaining passive as he rubbed his elbow.

“What the fuck did I just witness?”

“A conversation,” Will replied through sarcastically narrowed eyes.

“*Oh*, is that it?” Cooper was having his patience tested tonight. Will had put on an attitude, and it shifted Cooper into an altogether different state, his voice becoming loud and menacing. He took a step toward Will. “Confiding in him, yeah? *Your therapist*.”

“That was quite the announcement at dinner,” Will spat back. “Didn’t think to check with me first?”

“*So this is my fault!?*” Cooper exclaimed, two hands pointing toward his chest.

“I didn’t agree to move in with you, Cooper.”

“That’s what this is about? Your fucking *fear of commitment!?*”

Will wiped his face, exhaling hard. “We’ve talked about this.”

“No, Will,” Cooper said. “We *did not* fucking talk about this. You still won’t give me a reasonable explanation, but you seem very interested in explaining everything to your *fucking doctor*.”

“We're roommates, Cooper.” Will jousted back with an exasperated tone, arms flinging out in a wide shrug. “*We're friends.*”

“*Bullshit!*” Cooper spat. “I’m the one who sees you when he’s not looking.”

Will’s brow twisted. “What does that mean?”

“It means—I know the mood shift. I watch you. *What is that?* You can’t stand that he’s not paying attention to you anymore?”

“What?”

“Stop saying *what*, Will—*fucking christ*. You look desperate when Hannibal isn’t paying attention to you—like a petulant child—and it’s embarrassing.”

Will let out an amused and insulting chuckle. “That is just *not fucking true*, Cooper.”

“Oh no!?” Now out of his head with anger, Cooper shoved Will so hard he fell to the bed.

“Cooper!” Will yelled. “Knock it off!”

“Do you enjoy this? Pissing me off? Cause you seem to like it.”

Will layed into his elbows, smiled, and huffed, shaking his head, “In my defense, it’s really easy to do,” he said, mocking the man above him.

Cooper took a fast step toward the bed when two knocks came from the door.

Without pause, Hannibal pushed it open, Solene at his side.

“Is everything alright in here?” He asked.

Cooper and Will looked at each other and then at the door.

“Yeah, we’re fine, Lecter. You don’t have to check on Will. I’ve got him. And honestly, it’s not any of your business.”

“It is my business when voices are raised in my home.”

“*Doc*,” Beverly said, squeezing between Solene and Hannibal. “We’re about to leave. Ride down with us.”

“He can’t, Beverly,” Cooper said. “We’re talking.”

“Cooper—I wouldn’t push it,” Beverly said, holding a flat hand up toward him in disgust, then walking over to Will, putting the same hand out to help him up.

Will hesitantly took it. He wasn’t sure exactly what to do, but Beverly and Solene were heavily concerned at this point, and he thought it best to go ahead and walk them to the lobby. There would undoubtedly be a conversation consisting of an invitation to stay at their place, followed by Will’s heavy reassurance that everything was under control.

Will followed out, waiting as Solene and Beverly collected their things and said goodnight to Gustav and Hannibal. Once the three were loaded into the elevator, Hannibal closed the gate and shut the front door.

When Hannibal turned, hands in his pockets, Cooper was standing inside the doorframe of Will’s bedroom. Arrogant and smug, the putrid carcass of a man leaned into his shoulder, arms casually crossed as if nothing had happened at all.

“You’re testing the line, aren’t you, Lecter?”

“I would argue it is you who walks that line. You stride freely without knowing the consequences should you topple from the ledge.”

Cooper huffed with a wide smile. “He hasn’t told you, huh? That’s good. He’s loyal, my little William.” He walked over to Hannibal, arms still crossed, and towered above him. “You don’t know half of what you think you do, Lecter,” He stated before leaning down and speaking in almost a whisper. “*If you touch him again, consequences are all you’ll know*.”

Cooper swatted Hannibal’s shoulder once, a passive-aggressive pat, then walked back to Will’s bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

I THINK WE'RE ALONE NOW

1.

The dinner party would later be used anecdotally as a milestone or marker, the turning point in their story's dramatic retelling. The year that followed—The Last Year, as they would later call it—changed everything. Will and Hannibal would eventually look back at that time as transformative, a necessary tragedy, but they would never admit to everything that transpired. They would comb through the timeline, plucking out the handful of good moments while omitting the surrounding detail.

Sometimes, it was easier that way.

Sometimes, memories should stay buried.

After politely declining Beverly and Solene's offer to stay with them, Will returned from the lobby to find the apartment in an altogether different state.

It no longer held the tension of the previous hours.

The walls and floor had taken a deep cooling breath and settled into a refreshing stillness. Smelling of fresh soap and lemon pledge, purged of the party's filth, the space shifted into its evening trance, lulled by the low whir of the living room fan.

Will took advantage of the unexpected serenity and stood in the hall for a minute to collect his thoughts.

He looked to his right.

Hannibal and Gustav had already gone to bed. The door was shut tight, the crack around the doorframe dark and motionless. Will could internally admit that he would have preferred to find a guestless apartment. A part of him wanted nothing more than to throw the shirt from his body, slide in through Hannibal's door, and flop exhaustedly onto the feathered bed.

But that option was gone now.

The only option available to him was the one he chose from the very beginning—the direction he always went. One path in the forked road he had been walking down for the past year.

He looked to his left.

Behind his bedroom door, Cooper Kennedy waited for him. Given some time alone, Will knew the man was doing one of two things. He was either brooding—working up his already staunch anger—or was cooling in regret, ready to start a soppy apology.

Will knew Cooper's behaviors and responses now—the things that bothered him and how he reacted to them. He learned what calmed Cooper's temper and what ignited his rage.

A sick type of safety came with that predictability. A strange sort of gratitude attached to those mood swings. Will found comfort in knowing their attributes because if he could recognize them, he could avoid their consequences.

In that terrifying and reliant way, Will trusted Cooper.

He knew the outcomes, the variants he may encounter at the end of the hall, and accepted it for what it was. This was his life now, and he would have to subsist until another door opened.

He went to his bedroom door—choosing the same path once again—drew a breath into his tight chest, and exhaled as his hand turned the gold knob.

The moment he stepped inside, Cooper scooped him up.

"Will—baby! *Thank god*. I thought you'd left," He said with a sigh of relief, hugging Will tightly and littering his face with soft kisses.

Tonight, Cooper was sorry.

No matter what Will did, Cooper never left him. Even when Will was intentionally destructive, Cooper seemed determined to outlive Will's resolve—prove his ownership by never relenting, despite every mistake, no matter how unforgivable.

Unable to refuse the unbridled affection, Will wrapped his legs around the large man, sinking into a sweet tenderness he very rarely saw.

"*I'm sorry*—I'm sorry, and *I forgive you*," Cooper said into Will's ear, stroking his soft curls. He held Will against him with frustratingly possessive care, lowering them both to sit on the edge of the bed. "I'm not letting you go, Will." He whispered, peering up at the young man on his lap, sinister tears sitting inside his eyelids. "You think I would ever give you up?"

That was the best version of Cooper; the guilt-ridden Cooper.

Every time that version showed up—always and only after some heinous fight—Will was thrown headfirst into unbearable hope.

He'd question himself, wondering if this time Cooper would change, stay and never leave, and if he did, would Will finally fall in love like he was supposed to.

That Cooper was so unlike every other version. He was tame—a gentle giant. He touched with cautious hands, listened instead of spoke, and apologized like he meant it. Soft and enchanting, he tended to every want and need with suppliant dedication.

Will would look at Cooper in those moments, fear and sadness flickering inside golden green eyes, and see the man Cooper could have been. It seemed so real sometimes—like it was almost within reach.

But it wasn't. It never would be.

That version of Cooper was a walking fiction, a farce blocking out any light, causing all purity to rot. That version of Cooper would be gone before morning, only staying long enough to keep Will hooked, dependent on sparse moments of passionate affection.

Will knew what Cooper was doing. Will knew it was a lie—but he was lonely, and the attention felt good. If this were all he could have—a pleasurable falsehood—he would take it, seeking escape inside the short lifespan of Cooper's remorse.

So, Will denied his worry, ignored how horrifying the man had been less than an hour ago, willingly suspending his disbelief so he could enjoy each caressing touch. Like a parched desert animal, Will drank as much as he could. He didn't care that the water was tainted.

Sex was different on those nights. Cooper was attentive and delicate and serviced Will's body with consideration. What he loved most about those nights was how exquisitely close they came to everything he wanted, so much so that Will could almost manifest it.

Sometimes when Will closed his eyes, a brush of Cooper's hand or a swipe his a tongue felt so much like Hannibal.

Will would search through every sensation for the right press or stroke, lurching into the tingling heat the second it arrived. Moaning out far louder than usual, Will would encourage Cooper to repeat the motion that sent him closer to Hannibal, cultivating a fantasy.

That's what he was doing that night, after dinner, when the flint finally ignited.

Cooper pushed into Will from behind, holding him by the hips as Will's face was coaxed closer to the headboard. Unable to keep his balance, Cooper moved his hold up Will's torso to brace him, large fingers accidentally grazing the scar on Will's stomach. Sent a flash of Hannibal penetrating his flesh, Will let out a begging whine that was surely heard down the hallway.

He screwed his eyes shut, trying to hold onto the sensation when he heard a muted grunt from beyond the wall—one that did not belong to Cooper.

His eyes shot open, eyebrows twisting, body still bouncing against Cooper, who apparently hadn't heard the same sound because he continued uninterrupted. Curious, Will closed his eyes again, filtering out Cooper's *oh fucks* and *fuck yeahs* to find the sound he previously heard.

Another groan and Will smiled to himself, almost certain he knew what was happening. He drove his hips back into Cooper, hiding his intention, and responded in kind with a loud begging whine—testing a theory, finding the answer.

Hannibal's salacious voice, dull behind the drywall, answered back and echoed through Will's ears, the reverb perking his nipples and twitching his cock. It made him hard. Really fucking hard. He could cum just like this. Eyelids drooping closed, Will isolated the repetitive sounds and floated up into a fantasy, replacing Cooper with Hannibal.

Surely convinced he was performing on a Godlike level considering his boyfriend was never this enthusiastic when they fucked, Cooper basked in his egotistical pride. He worked harder, enjoying his newfound superpower, and when he did, Will had an excuse to add desperation and volume to every slutty whine.

Hannibal responded by adding power and depth to his groans, continuing until they were echoing back and forth across the hall—entering a connection—leaving their respective partners behind.

They listened to each other's voice, materialized each other's touch, sweet and erotic, and it was not only intimate—it was fun. Devious, illicit, a dark secret they shared.

Then suddenly—it was over.

When he grabbed his titillated shaft, Will came hard, expelling all sound and fluid from his body. Heightened and sharp, followed by repetitive aftershock, it was one of the best orgasms Will could remember having.

But it wasn't enough.

He poured back to the earth like rain, falling from the illusion, only to find his situation was the same. He was back in his body, isolated and bare, lying in the wrong room with the wrong man inside him.

The euphoria vanished, leaving bitter frustration behind.

Will was suddenly annoyed by the physical contact he coveted only minutes ago. Every touch was sandpaper, every kiss a burn, and when Cooper finally pulled out of him, Will couldn't stand the remnants—the thick, sticky feeling inside him—the leftover passion of someone he didn't love.

2.

It was too hot—suffocating.

Not just his lungs but every muscle, organ, and vein burned from lack of oxygen. It seared past physical pain down into torment and torture. An eternity passed, fire and water boiling him alive.

Stuck inside his unresponsive body, Will yanked his unconsciousness left and right, throwing it against his internal walls, begging in paralytic silence until he finally woke.

His eyes shot open, pulse roaring inside his ears as reality settled the difference between the dark room and the black abyss of sleep. For a moment, it seemed it would never happen, that perhaps he was stuck inside that perpetual limbo forever.

Did he yell? *He thought he yelled.*

A snore erupted loudly into the room, startling his drowsy body. He snapped his head to the left, finding Cooper asleep beside him. The jolt of hot anxiety drew a flashing sweat from his pores, solidifying reality instantly before fizzling out, leaving only his thudding heartbeat behind.

He shivered, hair raising as the cool night air pulled the warmth from his soaked skin. All the damp parts of his body became noticeable, the hair on his neck, the cotton of his shirt, the skin on his low back. A shower would surely wash away the chill, but that task was easier said than done. He would have to sit up first, and that was impossible.

Cooper's bulky arm was draped across Will's chest like a boa constrictor, inhibiting his lungs and immobilizing his body. Will tried to push it off, but somehow it weighed a metric ton more in its lame state. Even the pokes and pushes didn't work. Cooper was an intensely heavy sleeper who barely woke for even the hardest shove. No polite nudge in the world would get snoring Cooper Kennedy to roll over.

It was funny—that irony. Will wanted someone lying next to him for so long, and now that he had it, he wished it would dissolve just like his dreams. So, he remained motionless, his stinging eyes shifting above him.

A white streetlamp reflected through the multi-pane window making warped square cuts across the ceiling. The fan's blades rotated through the illuminated angles, casting a paced, countable shadow that locked Will into a hypnotic stare.

The nightmares would only become worse.

They already had.

The daily voices grew so strong that they started filtering into the night, jabbing at Will's brain tissue while he slept, stoking a feverscape filled with hellish images. Episodes of sleepwalking increased in number and intensity until they happened several nights a week. After a nearly successful attempt to walk through the front door and into an empty elevator shaft, Hannibal started sleeping with the apartment keys on his nightstand.

The problem was approaching dangerous territory.

Will still held out hope that these symptoms were residual side effects of the LSD, but he hadn't been dosed in months. It was growing harder to sight that as the source.

We're never going to leave you

You have to get us out of here

Please stop before it's too late

Will licked his chapped lips, craving a cigarette. Unable to sit inside his head any longer, he wiggled gently and slipped from under Cooper's arm, making his escape by rolling off the side of the bed and onto the floor.

He stood up and pulled the damp shirt from his body as he headed to the bathroom, sweat sticking to his flesh in a film. He turned the shower handle and stepped in.

The cold water was comforting. Beautiful and cleansing—a deep breath. He rinsed quickly, then stepped out, patting himself dry in the dark, doing his best not to wake Cooper.

Not that it was much of a concern.

When he walked back into the bedroom, Cooper was still quiet. He hadn't stirred at all. His large naked body laid face down, taking up almost the entire bed, covers bundled at the foot, which was funny. Any other time, the giant man would have selfishly pulled virtually every single blanket to his side.

Sleeping next to him was nothing like sleeping next to Hannibal.

If this dream had occurred in Hannibal's bed, Hannibal would have woken first, coaxing Will into consciousness, retrieving another blanket when he was cold.

Will pulled on a pair of joggers, grabbed his box of smokes, and quietly made his way out of the room. The door shut behind him with a muted click. He looked down the hall, past the front door to the opposite end.

Hannibal's room was silent again. Will couldn't recall the front door opening or the elevator rattling, but then again, he had been preoccupied with this fun little night terror. He didn't know if Gustav was still there or if he'd left after the fun was over. Part of him was tempted to walk down the hall and check.

How would Cooper react, he wondered, if he woke up to find Will in Hannibal's bed? Maybe Hannibal would finally kill him. Will could admit—he wasn't entirely upset by the idea—consequences be damned.

He walked into the living room, dark and silent, filled only with the low hum of the ceiling fan. Sometimes he liked coming in here alone, if only to think back to the very beginning, back when he and Hannibal had nothing except for their shared space—back when there was only one bed to choose from.

Smoking had been Will's original intention, headed toward the fire escape, but something about the room kept him there. It felt safe to him, like sitting inside nostalgia, dawn raising the tint of the windows just bright enough to crest through the dark. He went to the short bookshelves, sat beneath the casement windows like a bench, and tucked his leg to sit down, leaning his shoulder into the glass.

There was barely enough time to collect a single thought. Like a guardian saint who had been watching all along, a familiar voice uttered from the darkness.

"Is it nightmares?"

Will snapped his head to the archway. "*Hannibal,*" He said in a loud whisper. "Uh—yeah—I'm sorry, I tried not to wake you."

“I know,” Hannibal replied, slowly striding toward the window.

“Is uh—is Gus still here?” Will asked, watching as the man approached, sinching his cashmere robe and tucking his leg similarly to join Will at his side.

“He’s asleep,” Hannibal replied, shoulder leaned into the pane, looking out as twilight crept blue across the landscape, the streets still quiet below. Summer was approaching, the cool mixing with the warm, creating a fog that reduced visibility past a block or so. The large window seemed like a viewscreen for the transitional world outside, unable to see the day ahead, unable to see the night before.

Here, only the moment existed—Hannibal and Will inside it together.

“Would you like to tell me about it?” Hannibal asked.

Will glanced at him with a twisted brow, unsure what he was talking about. “Tell you about what?” He asked, folding his arms.

“Your dream.”

“Oh,” Will exhaled sharply, “It was about that night—our last night in Wolf Trap.” He said, looking back outside.

“Can you recall the details?”

Will’s eyes suddenly caught a blank stare, mind trying to recall what it had seen, tongue swashing over his bottom lip. “Nah—I,” He paused, narrowing his gaze a bit, “It’s like a movie playing at high speed—I can make out some parts while others are just overexposed images.”

“Tell me about them,” Hannibal invited. “The images.”

“Ah—they’re strange,” Will mused with a light shrug. “They cause sensations more than anything else—like I’m suffocating inside white paint.” He dropped his hands into his lap, sighing hard like expelling stress. “Then I dream we aren't here—that we didn’t run away together—that I chose not to.” He added, softly glancing over at Hannibal. “I wake up in a panic every time, worried that it might be true.”

Hannibal’s face softened, peering over at Will beside him. The content of that dream was one Hannibal could identify with. It was a frightful thought to him as well. “I can honestly say I’ve never conceptualized a future where we were apart—even in friendship—even in death,” He admitted.

“Probably what makes the dream so terrifying,” Will said, smiling gently at Hannibal. “It’s not something I can fathom.”

Hannibal’s eyes shifted across Will’s face, returning the smile, heart flushed with the ease of Will’s honesty—that beautiful truth hidden beneath the surface.

Will was openly admitting that he wanted to be here, in this apartment, living this life, just as much as Hannibal did, sharing the same living space, even through disaster. He had no desire to leave, move out, or change their lives so dramatically.

To Will, the thought of them separating was a nightmare—something that sent him into sleepless anxiety.

Will came out to the living room alone because Cooper had not woken to care for him. He sought protection elsewhere, using solitude to cover his worry, just as he always did. Hannibal witnessed the loneliness he engendered and realized how much they both relied on each other—inside that shared space—to save themselves from such ache.

“Will you be able to sleep?” Hannibal asked.

“I doubt it,” Will replied rather casually. He understood that sleep was an elusive character, rarely seen twice in one night.

“It’s nearly dawn. You’ll only miss a few hours.” Hannibal encouraged.

“What do you say,” Will started with a light smile, tapping Hannibal’s leg with his toe, “why don’t we go lay down over there” he joked, turning to nod his head toward the couch, “fall asleep—let those two find us in the morning.” He finished.

Hannibal heard the pretense. “Is that what you want?” he asked, testing the sincerity of the offer.

“Ah,” Will grunted, drawing out of his lean to sit on the edge of the bookshelf, hands resting beside him, avoiding all depth with humor. “I don’t know if I have the energy to clean up one dead body—let alone two.” He smiled.

Hannibal’s eyes darted across Will’s body, inspecting, searching.

Perhaps it was a joke—but it did indeed have truth behind it.

Hannibal knew that something heinous had Will restrained, preventing him from saying or doing what he wanted. That was something Hannibal didn’t take lightly. Hannibal understood his own detriment. His love left destruction in its wake. But the depth of Hannibal’s devotion was limitless.

He pushed off the window and joined Will, matching his posture, reaching over to gently coax his chin up, collecting the young man’s eye contact.

“I’d grant you any wish, Will,” Hannibal said, his words like silk. “You need only ask.”

Will meekly chased the hand as it was taken away, its sincerity lasting like a stain.

“Will you stay for a while?” He asked.

The request was so earnest that Hannibal nearly broke.

“Of course.”

Will subtly rested his shoulder against Hannibal’s—the shared weight barely noticeable. The moment opened—a sliver becoming a canyon—when Will sweetly let a few fingers caress Hannibal’s hand.

All the duress—all strife and argument—suspend. In the swirling amalgam of sticky blackness, they found each other, the small touch serving as a reminder they hadn’t lost each other. Hannibal inhaled, smelling the metallic heat of anxiety evaporate from Will’s body. His shoulders dropped their tension, and his heartbeats elongated into a steady rhythm.

It wasn’t sleep—but it was peaceful.

“Hannibal?” Will uttered out of the silence.

“Hmm?”

“Cooper doesn’t know about any of this—the nightmares—I mean,” Will said, hitching over the words. “Don’t—don’t tell him.” He finished, looking to Hannibal. “Please.”

Hannibal glanced over, peering into the shimmering blue. “I promise.” He said.

It was the truth.

Hannibal had no intention of playing with this vulnerability, wielding it as a weapon. He would protect Will from the world’s judgment, from Cooper casting concern or misunderstanding.

Hannibal knew that Will didn’t desire any false perceptions or anecdotal remedies. People like Cooper were always offering advice through their limited understanding. ‘Maybe you should see a doctor or a therapist, or maybe you should be on meds, eat better, meditate, do more yoga.’

While it was all well-intended advice, they were the words of a person who would never understand the breadth of Will’s inner abyss—the things that breathing for seven counts or swallowing two white pills would never satiate.

Hannibal knew that right now, all Will needed was companionship while the darkness encircled him, someone to remind him that he was alive when death seemed mere moments away.

So, Hannibal stayed.

3.

Will Graham didn’t move in with Cooper Kennedy—not right away.

After several heated arguments, which were frequent these days, Will agreed to move in when Cooper finished the Lichtman case. After that, things would slow down, and without the stress of Cooper's work schedule, they'd have ample time to settle into a new space.

The only problem: it was a big fat lie. Will was only buying time. He had no idea what he was going to do.

Early on, Will was resolute, confident he would follow Cooper's instructions and never tell anyone the truth. With their relationship becoming more volatile each day, Will grew wary that he would eventually have to tell Hannibal, or he would never get out.

The best time to do that would be when they were alone.

Easy enough.

There was a brief period, in both their external relationships, when Hannibal and Will were left alone in their apartment. Cooper was busy with the Lichtman case, which frequently required him to travel, and sometimes Will didn't see him for a week at a time. For a while, he was a loner inside the apartment.

Hannibal was still entertaining Gustav, who was making more and more demands of Hannibal's time. They would go out, and Will would stay home and find ways to distract his mind long enough to survive the night. It was relatively routine at that point.

That was until one particular Saturday evening, almost one year into their residency.

That was the night everything changed.

Will sat alone in the kitchen, facing another night of solitude by the glow of the undercabinet's fluorescent light when he unexpectedly heard the elevator arrive. The front door opened and closed, keys falling into the ceramic dish, jacket swashing off a body to be hung.

He checked his watch.

That was quick. Home not an hour after leaving the apartment.

Hannibal had a date with Gustav that night—an honest to god date at a restaurant and everything—and Will didn't expect him home for several hours, perhaps not at all.

It would seem the evening was less than successful.

The large man gracefully entered the kitchen, dressed to impress, surprise marking his face as he witnessed Will standing at the island, an unused shot glass toward the center, a handful of loose change sporadically scattered across the countertop.

"What are *you* doing home so early?" Will asked with a slight smile.

Hannibal slid his hands into his pockets, sheepish in the way he stood, licking his lips as they became dry under his need for a glass of wine. "Gustav left the restaurant. He asked to return

home.” He said.

“Struck out, huh?” Will said, bouncing a quarter onto the counter, jangling loudly as it landed in the glass.

“You could say that,” Hannibal replied, watching Will dump the glass and repeat the movement.

“Gus is a little more than you can handle, I take it.” Will joked, taking large swill from an opened bottle of whiskey.

While intrigued by whatever little ritual Will was performing, Hannibal was tired and had no desire to have Will mock him. He turned to leave the room.

“*Hannibal, wait!*” Will called after him.

Hannibal peered back.

“Don’t—I’m sorry. I don’t mean it. Just—” Will waved his hand, beckoning Hannibal to the island. “Come here. Do this with me,” he said, gesturing toward his setup.

Hannibal’s cheek pinned into a half-smile as he paced toward the granite countertop. “Where is Cooper this evening?” He asked.

Will turned around, retrieving two green glass highballs from the cabinet. “He’s out of town —stuck on a case.”

“The Lichtman case?”

“Yeah—I guess so,” Will said rather passively, no feeling attached to the words. It was as if he didn’t care that Cooper was gone.

He slid one highball to the opposite end of the kitchen island, then placed the shot glass in the center. He poured a finger’s worth of whiskey into both high-balls, then set down the bottle. “Stand over there.” He finished, gesturing his hand toward the appointed place opposite him on the playing field.

Hannibal was incredibly intrigued.

He took up his position across the island, removing his hands from his pockets and resting them on the ledge.

“It’s called quarters,” Will said, picking up the various loose change. “We each get a turn. I bounce it once on the counter, trying to make it into the shot glass. If I miss, it’s your turn, *but*—if I sink it, you have to drink, *and*,” he shook out his arms and cracked his neck, “you have to tell me a secret.” He finished with a sly smile.

“Are these the traditional rules?” Hannibal asked, face alight.

“No—but rules are made to be broken.”

Hannibal agreed to the terms. “Who serves?”

“I’ll let you go first,” Will said brightly, reaching over to drop several coins into Hannibal’s palm.

Hannibal jangled the change in his hand, plucking one from his palm and positioning his arm. He tossed it, rebounding off the granite, and the coin effortlessly landed in the shot glass with a clink.

“*Fuck*.” Will sighed, dropping his head with a patient smile. He admitted to his first defeat by downing his drink. “Ok, my secret.” He said as he uncorked the whiskey bottle, poured another preparative shot, and stared at Hannibal. “I have a lock of your chest hair.”

Hannibal’s face beamed back at Will, eyes glistening. “That’s not a secret, Will.”

“Yes, it is.” Will asserted.

“No, it isn’t,” Hannibal said, very pleased with himself. “I know you have a lock of my hair.”

“How—”

“You took it from my chest, Will,” Hannibal said with a tilted head. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

Will chuckled. “Ok, *well*—I thought it was a secret up until this moment, so—it counts. And it’s my turn.”

Will took up his coin, bent his knees a bit, adjusted his jeans, and sank it.

“Ha!” He clapped and pointed toward Hannibal’s glass. “Drink!”

Hannibal gleefully smiled, swallowing the brown liquor and pouring himself another helping as he divulged his secret. “I know you have a lock of my chest hair.” He said, a teasing grin on his face.

“*Hannibal*,” Will nagged.

“I assumed you didn’t know that I was aware.” Hannibal playfully retorted.

“You aren’t playing by the rules.”

“I could argue—”

“*Okokok*,” Will interrupted, both hands held up in surrender. “Fine—just go.”

Will was certain he had the upper hand in this challenge. Younger, more agile, with an impressive career in the sport of drinking games, he *knew* he could get the old man drunk first.

He could not have been more wrong.

The old man had a hidden talent. With sheer control of his arm and beautiful dexterity, Hannibal sank another coin. Will wondered if he had invited the wrong guy to this game.

“Al-right,” Will said, slinging back his drink like a champ. “Cooper snores way louder than you do.”

Hannibal perked up. The candid confession was unexpected, but he was delighted to hear it. He continued the joke to encourage honesty. “Is that possible?” He asked.

“Apparently,” Will said, smiling wide. “He has prescription-grade nasal strips.” He finished as he returned his volley and hit the target.

Hannibal drank. Spurred by his desire for additional relationship confessions, he followed Will’s example and divulged a similar secret. “Gustav picks his teeth at the dinner table.”

“*Ah*—I noticed.” Will offered with a smile. “Didn’t feel like that was winning him any favor in your eyes. Sucks them too—*loudly*.”

Hannibal took a long blink. “It’s a sound I’ve come to despise.”

Will laughed. “Alright—your go,” He pointed with excitement.

The two men exchanged their turns, back and forth like a tennis match, each drink bringing out more detailed and explicit secrets. Rather seamlessly, the game became an outlet for the two to vent every petty irritation—a bashing session aimed at their respective partners.

—

“Cooper doesn’t turn off lights. Ever. Just walks out of a room, leaving every single lamp on.” Will said, gesturing a flat hand through the air.

“Perhaps he has nyctophobia,” Hannibal added.

“Perhaps he has a boyfriend who walks behind him, shutting off all the lights.”

“Sounds to me like he’s not been properly trained.”

—

“Gustav meows in bed,” Hannibal admitted.

“*Meows*?” Will repeated both eyebrows twisting into each other.

“Like a feline.”

Will blinked hard several times. “What are you doing to him?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Hannibal chuckled. “It’s certainly never happened to me before.”

—

“Cooper is a sloppy kisser,” Will said, conveying annoyance with each emphasized word. “I’m talkin—*lips* over *lips*, *sucking* with *slobber* kind of kisser.”

“Again,” Hannibal smiled. “I believe you’re experiencing a training issue.”

“I should sign him up for a class. Do they offer make-out classes?” Will playfully asked. “Do those exist?”

“We should check the local community boards.”

—

Each drink brought with it a loosening nonchalance. The game was no longer a game. They forgot the rules, dropped the competitive challenge, and the structure fell away without care. The prize was no longer the proof of athletic superiority, nor was it the jovial *I Got You Drunk First*.

The gold they dug for was honesty.

They weren’t all secrets. They didn’t have to be.

Simple confessions, unspoken thoughts, posits from the past all poured out one line at a time, both men guarding the other’s vulnerability, repaying in kind with more personal and meaningful truths.

In their more fluid state, Will retreated from his legs, chose a seat on the counter, and leaned back into the cabinets behind him. Hannibal took a seat at the island, turning his stool toward Will, hand rolling the nearly empty high ball against the granite countertop. They faced each other across the distance, several feet apart, but the two men had never been closer.

Insides slippery from the melting heat of alcohol, words escaped unprompted, each braiding a thick, wiry connection between the two men until the link was like a bridge.

Will’s heels knocked gently into the cabinet doors below, taking up the last swallow of whiskey from his glass.

Looking at him now, nipples perked beneath his thin cotton shirt, thighs stretching tight inside his light wash jeans, Hannibal couldn’t help where his thoughts went. He surrendered a small part of himself—one he had held back for far too long—and sent it across the divide.

“I kept those images you sent me,” Hannibal admitted, garnet eyes peering over at the boy across from him.

Will kicked his head up, feet halting immediately. A proud smile threatened to pull his lips from their place, cheeks flecking with rosy pink, “The ones of my dick?” He asked.

“Yes.”

"*That good*, huh?" Will smirked.

Hannibal maintained his sincerity, continuing his connected gaze. "I often look at them when I'm intimate with Gustav." He added.

Will raised his eyebrows. "You look at my dick while your fucking Gus?"

Face soft, open, and warm, Hannibal freely admitted, "The fantasy continues to be more satisfying than the reality."

Will blinked a few times, considering the information's effect on him. Yes, it was arousing. The thought did turn him on. But that wasn't what Will focused on.

Hannibal could have any choice of men—attractive men—men like Gustav. He knew how to ask and give the things he wanted in bed; if he desired something, he could easily attain it. Still, somehow, *it wasn't enough*. Hannibal chose to stare at a digital screen with a two-dimensional image and think of Will rather than enjoy the entirety of an actual human being.

Will reflected on that. He thought of Cooper and how he had to search similarly for satisfaction, even when brought to completion. Will had a wealthy, well-endowed, herculean sex god in his bed every night, but still, *it meant nothing to him.*

He and Hannibal were alike, reaching for each other while they touched others, hoping somehow it would satisfy. So, Will shared his similar lack, his similar search, and his similar solution.

"I listen to you—sometimes—listen to you to when you're with Gus—to get off when I'm with Cooper." He said casually, arms crossed, a sharp gaze filtering through his relaxed eyelids.

"The nights I can hear you down the hall?" Hannibal inquired, sitting in a similar disposition.

"Yes."

Hannibal probed further. "Are you purposefully boisterous to invite my responses?"

Will tilted his head with a divisive half-smile. "You knew that already." He asserted.

Hannibal returned the smile, nodding once. "I had hoped."

Will took a breath, enjoying the bliss of that gentle connection. "It's funny," He started. "I'm not loud like that when I'm alone with Cooper."

Hannibal shrugged. "Cooper doesn't satisfy you," He offered as a statement of fact.

"He doesn't satisfy me?" Will repeated with a high arched eyebrow.

"He may bring you to orgasm, but it's clear there are desires you haven't spoken to—things you can't ask for. A climax is only part of the sexual experience, Will. Satisfaction is

something else entirely."

"And you think you understand what satisfies me, is that it?" Will sarcastically asked. "You know, but Cooper doesn't."

"Does he touch you as you deserve?" Hannibal spoke with conviction, still eased back in his chair, but his eyes burned like flames. "Does he cater to your needs, inquire past your shame and draw out salaciousness, providing your preferences with a caring hand? Does he appreciate how beautiful you are when he watches you?"

"*Beautiful*?" Will asked, taken back by the implication.

"Yes, Will." Hannibal asserted, eyes slightly puzzled. "Were you not aware that I think you're beautiful?"

Will's brow opened into soft shock. He took a hard swallow. "No." He said meekly.

"You are."

Will heard the words and believed them without effort, never doubting for a moment that Hannibal did indeed see him this way. Soft elation shared his heart like a memory, chiming inside each beat like silver bells. This feeling, *the feeling of value*, was not one Cooper had ever given him. Will started to concede the accuracy of Hannibal's insight.

"Coop—Cooper's compliments are less—elegant—than that," Will admited slowly.

Hannibal took it a step further. "I find them demeaning," He said.

Will dropped his head back, eyes shifting across the ceiling. "Ya know," He sighed, "he's like that more than he's not. Even his affection sometimes feels like a slight, like maybe some part of him hates me."

Concern crested Hannibal's face. "Elaborate."

Will thought for a moment.

Sex with Cooper started out enjoyable. Will bottomed like he was expected to, trying to impress Cooper with how good, pliant, and experimental he could be. Cooper always offered praise for Will's enthusiasm, but Will quickly learned that Cooper Kennedy thought enthusiasm was permission.

After a while, he stopped asking if "*this was alright*" or if "*this was too much*." He would fuck Will with "*take it all until I cum*' and that's how it was. When Will would ask him to stop, not with cute begging for mercies but out of honest to goodness need, Cooper would always pump several thrusts past the request. He'd stop, but not without getting angry.

"In the beginning, he was careful because he knew I was—inexperienced—but it didn't last long. After a while, he stopped being careful."

The information was alarming to Hannibal. “You feel like an object, required to perform instead of asked to enjoy.”

“Yes,” Will said, avoiding eye contact, suddenly uncomfortable.

“You understand that it doesn’t have to be that way,” Hannibal said, trying to draw Will to look at him again.

Will huffed, shaking his head once. “*Too little—too late.*”

Hannibal narrowed his eyes for a moment, taking in the words as well as their meaning. Curious, he became more direct. “Will,” he started, pausing to consider his words, “You speak of your relationship with Cooper as if you are barred by it. Trapped from escaping.”

“Yeah—well.” Will shrugged.

The younger man still didn’t look at him. Hannibal contemplated bringing up what Cooper said after their less-than-successful dinner party, but he was uncertain if that would drive Will back inside, scared or untrusting. He wanted Will to be honest because he wanted to, not because he felt obligated.

So Hannibal asked directly.

“Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Will finally met his gaze.

It was strange how the opportunity presented itself so seamlessly. Will sometimes felt Hannibal was reading his thoughts, seeing them, or sensing them.

As much as he wanted to open up entirely, he knew he was drunk, and if he were going to decide to tell Hannibal about Cooper, he needed a sound mind. So he offered an altogether different truth—one that bubbled up inside the intimate sea of Hannibal’s care and concern.

“I miss you, Hannibal,” Will said, steady in his gaze, gentle in his delivery. “You’re right down the hall, and you feel like you’re an ocean away again.”

Hannibal swallowed, feeling a watery rush of affection for the man across from him.

“You’re always welcome to stay with me, Will. That’s not changed.”

“Ah—well. It has changed—hasn’t it” Will said with a sigh, planting into his hands, sitting up to slouch forward. “You have Gustav with you,” he finished, direct in his gaze.

Hannibal returned the stare, offering with soft lasciviousness and steady words.

“He’s not with me now.”

Will looked at Hannibal with a serene state of awe.

How many meanings sat inside that handful of words. Powerful yet resigned, stoic but sincere—an astonishing man with a million different complexities. They watched each other. Inhaled together. Exhaled together. Chests rising and falling, their simple expressions unchanging, a nexus threaded between them.

“I want to kiss you so bad it hurts,” Will said softly.

“What’s stopping you?” Hannibal asked.

“We’ve never done it before.” Will shrugged. “You’ve had your head up my ass, but you’ve never kissed me before.”

“Would you like me to now?”

Will maintained steady and fearless eye contact.

“Kinda—yeah.” He admitted with a light smile.

Two words—*enough to change everything*.

Hannibal stood from his seat, taking slow and specific strides toward the counter. He ran a hand up Will’s thigh as he slotted himself between the young man’s legs. Faces mere inches apart, their liquor-warmed skin ghosted over each other, giving enough pause to inhale the vulnerable moment.

Will didn’t tremble like he thought he would. He wanted this so severely that nothing could shake him. His eyes traveled across Hannibal’s face, landing on his inviting lips, unflinching when the larger man leaned in.

They pressed into each other, received each other, kissing with sweet force, supple lips like flower petals, hiding an enraged passion that drew Will’s mouth open. Hannibal pulled off with a slick suction, inquiring across Will’s face to ensure he could continue. The beautiful boy affirmed by nuzzling next to Hannibal’s nose before kissing him again.

They cautiously placed their hands, Hannibal’s fingers dragging gently down the side of Will’s face, delicately touching this fragile thing.

It was not the sparkling magic of some fairytale. It didn’t ignite a fire, shoot fireworks, or overwhelm the senses. There was no adrenaline rush, no inexplicable sensation.

Hannibal’s lips belonged there, pressed softly against Will’s mouth. It was right—exactly how it was meant to be.

Will had never felt that type of contentment. He knew that when they separated, the void would only expand, the sensation growing larger and lonelier, now starkly contrasted to this moment—*when Will had everything*.

You can’t keep this.

Let him take you away.

Stop.

Someone is here

The door buzzed.

Hannibal and Will parted, but just barely, mouths exchanging hovering breaths.

The second man is here to take your joy away

“You’re buddy’s here,” Will said.

Hannibal looked at him curiously. “How do you know it’s Gustav?”

“I just know.”

“I don’t have to answer it,” Hannibal said, remaining close.

Will smiled at the offer but conceded that the moment was now over. “If you don’t, he’ll start looking for you, and I don’t need him calling Cooper.”

“Very well,” Hannibal agreed and strode out of the kitchen, flat hand fixing his handsome hair.

Will dropped his head back to the cabinet as he listened to the events happening just beyond the room. He heard the intercom, the rattling elevator, the front door open, and finally Gus; volume turned up to ten. Apparently, he had mustered up the courage to confront Hannibal about whatever quarrel had ruined their date by getting stinking drunk. Words slightly slurred, lopsided in his footfalls, he started conversing with Hannibal, half in English and half in another language.

Will didn’t hear everything that was said. He didn’t really care too.

Hannibal was probably not attentive enough, or honest enough, or committed enough. Gustav probably placed high expectations on the evening out, ready to discuss the progression of their relationship, only to be bitterly disappointed when their plans didn’t align.

The conversational inflection indicated he expressed his anger first, fast and erratic, made a few demands in a moderate yet severe tone, then settled into a calmer, more forgiving state, surely being swayed by—well—literally any of Hannibal’s mannerisms.

Will heard Hannibal’s bedroom door open and shut, followed by the large man’s strides across the hardwood, growing louder until he re-entered the kitchen. Will sat forward as Hannibal casually approached, maintaining his distance.

“He’s been drinking.”

“I gathered,” Will said with a half-smiled.

“He’ll sleep here tonight.”

“Ah,” Will nodded, saddened but accepting. He really didn’t have room to complain.

Hannibal saw the disappointment. “I can sleep in your room tonight, if you wish.” He offered.

Will smiled again but shook his head. “Not tonight.”

Hannibal didn’t care if Gustav found them in bed together, but he understood that Will did. He understood now that Will was heavily worried about Cooper—afraid of something. Will had seen a great deal in his life. If something phased him to the point that he was editing his behavior, Hannibal knew that it shouldn’t be taken lightly. For now, until Will decided to divulge the details, he would follow Will’s wishes if only to save him from any further anxiety.

He took Will’s hand and pressed his lips to the knuckles. “Goodnight, Will.” He said softly.

Will squeezed his hand twice before he allowed the large man to walk from his grasp, uttering just before he exited, “Goodnight, Hannibal.”

They would later reference that night as the start of the affair.

VERTICAL CASEMENT

1.

His hands plunged into the damp, black earth, dusting his hands in silt, packing the crevices of his palms and under his fingernails with fertilized soil. He scraped back a small hole with his bronze-plated spade and inserted a small bulb, burying it alive.

The rooftop terrace, while adjacent to the neighboring buildings, was private and belonged solely to the tenants of Apartment 437. A small greenhouse sat toward the back, constructed of repurposed windows and hand-laid sandstone, and housed the various flora of Hannibal Lecter's garden.

He planted tulips, daffodils, and hyacinths for blooming time around Christmas. Garlic, beautifully fragrant micro-greens, endives, carrots and radishes, and an assortment of hydroponic cabbages for the summer.

He had planned to stay up there, an escape until Gustav woke and left. A hungover Gus was not something Hannibal wished to contend with. On this particular day, he had a different man swelling inside his head like a windy ocean tide. The thoughts would surge in roaring yet calm waves, then recede, only to return with equal force moments later.

He had an entire day planned, and it was essential to complete his gardening tasks at the optimal time to miss Gustav's exit but greet Will upon waking.

The vantage point was perfect. He was able to hear the front entrance slamming shut, and he could easily stand to look over the rooftop ledge and see if when Gustav had made his exit.

As he finished harvesting his sweet peppers and tomatoes, Hannibal heard a hard echo punch through the air. He stood slowly, looking down toward the crosswalk where Gustav trotted over the divided yellow stripes, shaking his head, turning around to take a few steps backward, then continuing his journey.

Hannibal immediately tossed his spade into the basket. He looked at his watch. 12:45 PM. Gustav certainly made himself at home. There was still a slim chance that Will hadn't woken, but even hungover, Will was usually up before noon, especially if he slept alone. He collected his things and made his way back downstairs.

Returning inside from the yellow sunshine brought a dull blue hue to Hannibal's vision. Slowly, the darkness adjusted back to normal saturation, still seeming darker than before, burned by the mental comparison of the outside light. In that way, the summer beckoned residents outdoors, where things were vivid.

Those days the apartment served as little more than a refuge, a place to recuperate for brief periods of time before returning to the hot, radiant day.

The oak wood flooring added coolness to the apartment, even in the sweltering heat of summer. Hannibal loved hearing Will's bare feet tread across it in pale strides, feeling him through the vibrations like ripples on a cool pond.

However, no such sound existed when Hannibal returned from the roof. The surface was calm, silent, even beyond Will's bedroom door. He walked down the hall and into the kitchen, finding it empty as he dropped his freshly picked vegetables into the sink. Flipping the faucet on, a stream of cool water rushed down, tinkling the trowel and rinsing specks of dirt from the fleshy skins.

Hannibal wondered if Will had left the apartment.

Just then, he heard a dim cough come from beyond the pantry. Hannibal flipped off the water and listened again.

Another small cough.

The fire escape.

Hannibal smiled wide, feeling like a child who had just won a game of Hide and Seek. He dried his hands, returned to his room for a mere moment to retrieve something from his chest of drawers, then headed toward the source of the pale sound.

A vertical casement window with a rod iron crank sat between the border of the pantry and the laundry room, only visible from certain angles of the kitchen. When open, it swung out over a spacious fire escape, now decorated with a long planter containing a small herb garden and several textured polyester pillows.

It was Will's favorite spot in the apartment. He went out there all the time, even when he wasn't smoking, especially when it was hot outside.

Hannibal rested his hands on the window sill, leaning into his locked arms, peering out onto the makeshift iron terrace, smiling sweetly when he found what he was looking for.

Will laid longways across several aligned pillows, bare-chested, faded jeans low around his hips, one hand on his belly, the other behind his head, eyes shut in the newly hot summer sun. Shiny yellow beams dusted his dark curls like glitter.

"We have a rooftop," Hannibal announced to the lying man.

Will opened one eye to look over at Hannibal, then closed it again with a smile. "Do we?" He replied sarcastically.

"What are you doing out here?" Hannibal asked with amused curiosity.

"I like the view better."

"You're laying down with your eyes closed."

Will lifted his neck and squinted at Hannibal through the raining sunshine. “I just like it better, Hannibal—either come out here and sit with me or go back inside.” He finished, dropping back down. “Shit.”

Hannibal smiled, laughing gently through his nose, and hurdled over the window sill out onto the fire escape. He went to the corner, stacked several pillows, and sat down, pulling a matte black pen from his pocket. He brought it to his lips, pressed the round silver button, and inhaled. He opened his mouth where a feint stream of vapor exited.

Will sniffed the air to a delightful epiphany. “Are you smoking weed, Doctor Lecter?” He asked, eyes still closed, body still relaxed.

“That is precisely what I’m doing,” Hannibal replied.

Will reached his arm up behind him, fluttering his hand open and closed.

“Will, I don’t think—”

“Do *NOT* act like you came out here without the explicit intention of getting me high.” Will retorted, fluttering his hand again. “Hand it over.”

Hannibal placed the soft pen in Will’s hand, brushing his flat fingers across Will’s open palm as he went. Will gave him a wink, then put the silver spout to his lips, tasting Hannibal’s saliva mixed with a sweetly flavored inhale.

He closed his eyes, the mild warmth, the sticky vapor, filling his lungs to capacity, holding as it sent him up, up, up, into a dream, hovering just above this world. Will had smoked before, of course, but not in this life—not since meeting Hannibal. As if he were contained inside the oil, lacing the drug with his potent scent, and suddenly Will felt Hannibal’s presence more fully, more brightly, and their existence on that fire escape became something else entirely.

He opened his eyes, and inside that moment, laying on the fire escape, the sun on his skin, vapor leaving his mouth, his hand once again brushing Hannibal’s, he felt like Dorthy walking out of her black and white life into a technicolored world of Oz.

“That’s nice,” Will said softly.

“Isn’t it,” Hannibal uttered through a held breath.

“Are you doing another?” Will said, tilting his head back to look at Hannibal from his upside-down view.

“Mmm.” Hannibal hummed, mouthpiece between his lips.

“Good,” Will said, reaching his hand up again.

Hannibal chuckled softly through his exhale, passing back the pen.

Will took another slow-drawn hit, sending him a level higher where contemplations lurked, the thoughts that suddenly wanted a voice lying in wait.

“You ever people watch Hannibal?” He asked, pen resting between his limp hand and his chest.

“Watch passers-by?” Hannibal replied.

“Yeah.”

“I am constantly aware of my surroundings, Will.”

“Of course you are,” Will huffed, slightly defeated.

Hannibal considered him for a moment. “What were you going to say, Will?

Will took another inhale, thinking. He exhaled and passed the pen back to Hannibal. He rolled onto his stomach, resting his forehead on the back of his hands, peering down at the sidewalk as strangers crossed beneath him. It was a small thought—a calculation more than anything. Easily passed on a regular day, but something that had louder meaning now, in this new glistening world.

“Sometimes I watch these people,” Will started. “I think about their daily lives and how often they suddenly end. When you know them, you grieve. When you don’t, you watch it on tv or read about it somewhere, halfway begging for more.”

“The familiarity adds emotional context to an otherwise unrelatable story,”

“Sometimes these strangers pass, and I think about how I could be close with any one of them. We are a handful of conversations away from being *familiar*—that’s the difference between feeling sad or excited by their absence.” Will added, speaking through the gap between two rod iron bars.

Hannibal licked his upper lip, narrowing his eyes as he considered Will’s comment. “You seem pensive on this topic.”

“I was contemplating highly publicized deaths the other day.”

Hannibal raised his brow, slightly surprised, then offered, “Prestige has no impact on the dead, Will.”

Will was quick to reply. “Celebrity has an aftershock. When it’s gone, the impact vibrates out, reaches places it wouldn’t have before.”

“Even that fades with time,” Hannibal reassured. “It’s buried along with everything else.”

“Just a matter of waiting long enough—huh?”

“Precisely.”

The wonders of that beautiful mind—Hannibal thought.

Simple postulates of everyday life that became unspeakably profound. These were the passing thoughts of Will's mind, fleeting glances, common and average, that people didn't generally share. That small glimpse into Will's mind was revealing.

Hannibal was beginning to understand.

While the answer hadn't been fully formulated, all the evidence was there—a structure beneath the facade that held up all the actions of the past year. Even though their most recent reveals were squeezed out after the heavy lubrication of drugs and alcohol, honesty had a caress as blissful as the touch of Will's fingertips.

The celebrity death Will was considering wasn't as far-fetched as it seemed. Hannibal thought he might follow the line and delve into the depths of that topic but refrained, instead, allowing them to remain in the beautiful haze they now shared.

Hannibal leaned forward to pass the pen back. When he went to place it in Will's hand, Will latched on, making Hannibal pause. He looked down at the glowing face—completely unreadable.

"Aren't you hot?" Will asked, the misty euphoria taking all elaboration from his words and widdling down to the point.

"Am I hot?"

Will released Hannibal. He perched on his elbows, ducking his lips down to the pen in hand. He inhaled, then exhaled and innocently looked back up.

"It's ninety degrees out, Hannibal." He said.

"I'm aware," Hannibal replied.

They shared a silence, appraising each other. It could have been any number of influencing factors, but for whatever reason, Hannibal had no idea what Will was about to do.

Will plugged the vape between his lips, lightly clenching the mouthpiece between his teeth, and crawled over to Hannibal.

Hannibal's mouth softened into an expecting smile, letting the dark young man make his way up over his legs to straddle his hips. Will rested his round ass on Hannibal's lap, adjusting himself by grabbing Hannibal's neck.

"Let's fix this, shall we?" Will said, his speech obstructed by the pen. He sent his fingers gently under the brim of Hannibal's shirt, sliding his hands up the exposed skin. Hannibal looked into Will's eyes, so light blue they were almost white, perfect and pristine, the irises blown wide. He raised his arms and let Will remove the shirt, several strands of grey hair falling to his forehead. "There we go," Will whispered, gently placing the pen back between Hannibal's lips.

Hannibal took the pen, pressing with his index finger and taking another inhale. Will brought his lips shamelessly close to Hannibal's, breathing in the musky sweetness, the salty saliva on

his tongue and mouth, exchanging vapor and breath. The glinting cherry of Hannibal's eyes had flavor and texture as Will peered into their depths, tasting like sweet medicine that was so frightfully amazing he couldn't help himself. He was convinced that Hannibal would somehow taste this way, and if he were to drink, the tart pain relief would hit his lower spine.

He wanted it. He needed it. So he took it.

Will plunged his fingers into the grey hair on the back of Hannibal's scalp, bringing their faces together, and kissed with such fever he forgot himself. Broad hands slid up Will's sinewed back, capable of death at any moment, yet tenderly caressing each peak and valley as if it belonged to him.

Bottom lip meeting top lip, top lip meeting bottom, tongues touching with perfect pressure, they sank into unified synchronicity. Wet and perfect, solving every single ache, and Will was right—it did taste like cherry. It did turn his spine to jello.

It was the most fantastic thing he had ever experienced, on a cloud looking down on himself. A cotton candy cloud. He could feel it tingling his skin, sugar crystals exfoliating him in powerful pins and needles.

Will suctioned from the kiss. "You taste good," he said under hooded lids.

Hannibal grabbed him again, smiling as he continued to kiss the beautiful boy between his words.

"Like cherry," Will whispered.

Hannibal grinned, the tips of his sharp teeth visible. "Cherry?" He asked.

"Yes," Will said, mouth hovering over Hannibal's. "Cherry."

Hannibal returned his lips to Will's, wrapping his arms around the younger man's torso. Will pulled on him, elbows across shoulders, dipping back as Hannibal's force leaned into him. He could feel Hannibal's powerful heart thumping, filling inside his own chest as if the heart were his.

Hannibal's delicate lips were far more passionate than last night, fevered in their application.

How did the man shave so smoothly? Will had no idea. His face was soft, smooth inside the embrace of Will's hands. Will let his hands drop to Hannibal's trembling stone chest, taking two firm handfuls of hair. Did Hannibal start conditioning his chest hair? Fuck. It was so fucking soft. Will wanted to bury his face in it. Use it as a pillow. Fingers threaded through the coarse strands, he sent them down Hannibal's torso, exploring every inch.

More—Will thought—*more.*

His thigh pressed against Hannibal's hot hardness, so thick when erect, and he yearned for it like he never previously had. Tight and tingling with pressure, he clutched his own erection through thick denim, not thinking twice when slowly rolling his hips.

Hannibal parted their lips with a light suck, “Will,” he whispered, breathing heavily.

“Will!”

Hannibal and Will separated further, eyeing each other at the unexpected voice.

“Will!” Beverly called again.

Will smiled meekly and climbed off Hannibal’s lap, now crested with a large damp patch.

“What is this?” Will flirtatiously asked with a broad smile, grazing a thumb over the spot.

Hannibal quickly pushed out of the corner and gracefully returned to the apartment through the window, disappearing inside. Will stood up, heavily frustrated.

“DOC!—Where the hell are you?”

“I’m out here!” Will hollered in, adjusting his pants, sitting on the stair, and hunkering over his lap.

Beverly came to the window, bottle of pink wine in hand, chambray shirt falling from her thin shoulder, revealing her white tank-top beneath. She put her tongue to her cheek in a smile, looking at the man on the fire escape. She stuck her arm through the window, handing Will the bottle, then climbed over the sill, smug giddiness filling her face.

“*What—were—we—just—doing—out—here*?” She asked, putting her fingers to her chin like some type of smart-ass investigator.

“Smoking,” Will replied, unamused.

“Ah,” Beverly said, walking to the small clump of discarded fabric laying like evidence at a crime scene. She dropped the denim button-up from her arms, bent down, picked up the shirt, and pulled it over her slim body. Bev gathered the excess material and tied it into a knot on her hip. “Smoking—and?” She said, presenting her point with both hands.

“That’s my shirt,” Will said.

Sometimes Beverly wondered if Will thought she was stupid. Spacial reasoning wasn’t her strong suit, but she had worn Will’s shirts before, and this was not Will’s shirt. Far too large, far too—*perfumed.*

“That’s crazy how you felt the need to tell me that.” She joked again, pulling it back off her head and gently tossing the dangling fabric into Will’s lap. “Put it on.” She demanded.

Will sighed hard, snatching it from her hand and pulling it over his head.

As she suspected—far too large to be Will’s shirt.

“*Ho—ly—shit*.” She said, her face brightening. “Is it Hannibal’s!?” She aggressively whispered, leaning forward to search through the window for the culprit.

Beverly quickly stood up straight when she saw a mass shifting beyond the frame.

Hannibal reappeared, saying nothing, holding his arm through the window. He and Will made eye contact, Hannibal in a fresh pair of pants, now obviously perturbed. Will took the shirt off and handed it back.

“What’s wrong?”

Will knew that question would go unanswered. Of course, Hannibal wasn’t about to express his emotional state in front of company, but he was being delightfully rude by not even acknowledging Beverly’s presence.

“Hi, Hannibal,” Beverly said with a smile, fluttering her long fingers. “Lovely day for a sit on the fire escape.”

And with that, Hannibal disappeared.

Will sighed, dragging a hand down his face. “Why do you have to do that?” He asked Beverly, squinting to look up at her in the sunlight.

“Oh—he’ll be fine,” Bev said.

“Yeah—you don’t have to live with him.”

“I didn’t know I was interrupting,” She stated plainly. “You’re the one who invited me here.”

Beverly crawled back inside to retrieve two wine glasses, yanking the drawer open to pull out the corkscrew and then shoving it closed with her hip. She crawled back out, closing the window with such quiet precision the latch barely made a sound. She grabbed the bottle from between Will’s knees and began opening it.

“I thought you were with Cooper.” She whispered, her sinewy arms digging into the cork with forceful twists.

“I *am* with Cooper,” Will said, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pants pocket and lighting one up.

“So, are you gonna sleep with him?”

“Cooper?”

“Do you think I’m talking about Cooper?” She widened her eyes, staring straight at Will and mouthing with exaggeration the word HANNIBAL while gesturing her head toward the window.

Will blew out an exhale of smoke in a sarcastic laugh. “No.”

“You laugh,” She said, popping the cork and handing Will a glass, “but we ALL see how you two interact.” She brought the spout to the edge and poured him a generous amount of wine. “Like some mysterious—secret sharing—bromance.” She finished, filling her glass and

plopping down on the bed of cushions. “And quite frankly, after that last little show…I prefer Hannibal to Cooper.”

“I’m not going to sleep with Hannibal.” Will insisted.

“Why not?” She asked, peering over at him as she took a sip of pink liquid.

“I don’t want to.”

“Will—that is a lie. I saw the look on your—” she shifted her eyes down to Will’s lap then back up “—*face* when I came out here.”

“You are ruining this for me,” Will said, shaking his head.

“Ruining what?”

“My high, Beverly.”

She heard him but was not about to let up. “We had sex.” She quipped.

“We did not have sex.” Will retorted.

“You ate me out.”

“Dear god.” Will chugged his wine, then sucked on his cigarette. Yes, it was true, but Will felt awkward about the memory now, how Beverly helped him finish his last exploration in the seemingly straight world and how it had solidified things for him.

“Really well, in fact,” Beverly added.

Will blew out an aggressive exhale, “What’s your point?”

“My point is—I was with Sol, and she didn’t care.”

Will huffed. “Cooper would care.”

“So don’t tell him.” Bever retorted, setting down her wine glass.

“Beverly.”

“I’m just saying—“ she said, holding up her flat hands. She scooted closer to Will’s knees, sitting with her sweet and caring face, hugging his calves with a kindred embrace. “This is all new for you. You shouldn’t limit yourself in the exploration of who you are. If you’re attracted to Hannibal—maybe you should—follow that.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“So what?” Beverly shrugged. “Do you like him?”

Will sighed, looking through the vertical casement window, the darkness beyond it. “Immensely.” He said.

“Ok—so next time you accidentally fumble into his lap,” She said with a wink, “see what happens.”

“What about Cooper?” Will asked, caringly tucking a strand of black hair behind her ear.

“You can be honest with Cooper and true to yourself. If he can’t handle it—maybe Cooper isn’t the guy for you.”

Maybe Cooper isn’t the guy for you.

How very easy those words were said and how very little they mattered now.

2.

Beverly didn't know.

She would look back to that day and regret absolutely everything she said.

If she had known, she would have never offered the advice she did.

She would have never sent Will out of the frying pan and into the fire.

3.

He didn’t want to lose another opportunity. It seemed people were constantly interrupting any chance for an intimate moment.

They finished their glasses of wine, and Beverly agreed to leave, sensing that her advice was heard and maybe she should let things play out. She left with a smile, winking and mouthing GOOD LUCK as Will closed the front door.

When Will walked back into the living room, Hannibal was on the sunny part of the floor like a cat, laying on his side, elbow tucked under his body, a newspaper flat in front of him, turning pages, pen dangling from his lips. He brought his fingers to the button, drew in with a

wet crackle, then expelled the vapor, eyes uninterrupted as they followed a trailing line back and forth.

Will smiled.

Hannibal the Cannibal. Bare-chested. High on the living room floor. Reading from a newspaper.

“Hey you,” Will said, leaning against the doorway. “I’m sorry—about Beverly. I forgot she was coming over.”

“Not at all.” Hannibal curtly replied.

Clearly, the man wasn’t happy. Will couldn’t blame him. It was the exact wrong moment to be interrupted. So, Will tried to offer a reconnection through a habit they both knew and enjoyed. Will scoured his mind for the right line of poetry, landing on the only phrase that had been churning through his thoughts on a continual loop since Hannibal first uttered it.

“Their relationship consisted—”

But no reply came. Hannibal simply took another inhale from the pen and flipped another page of his paper, not looking up once.

Will lightly scoffed, still amused. “Are you angry now?” He asked, pushing off the wall and walking over to the laying man. “Angry that we keep getting interrupted?” He stepped over Hannibal’s hips, a foot on either side.

Hannibal rolled to his back, curiously looking up at Will. “Would you like me to be angry?” He asked. “You seem rather intent on vexing me.”

Will looked down with a smile, hanging hand fluttering open and closed. Hannibal refrained from smiling and passed up the pen.

“Maybe,” Will said. He put the pen to his lips, taking a hit as he fluidly sank from his standing position, hips planting on Hannibal’s lap once again. Hannibal rested into his locked arms, cautiously watching the flirtatious act. Will adjusted in his seat with purpose, blowing vapor from the side of his mouth. “Did you get me high in hopes I would do this?” He asked.

Hannibal peered at him, eyes dancing. “Are you only doing this because you’re high?”

Will’s cheek pinned into a half-smile, “No.”

Hannibal’s hand trailed around Will’s torso, to his back, before sinking deeply into the gap of his jeans. He reached in to grab the plump ass, fingers teasing the crease, second hand tenderly holding Will’s neck as he drew them together for a kiss.

Sweet elation. Right back where they started from.

Will had only to roll his hips, searching again for that delicious hardness, when Hannibal grabbed his waist, moving him to the floor.

Laying there on their sides, facing each other, kissing soft and sweet under the transom light, Will was euphoric. It was as if the living room, this exact spot, had been waiting for this moment, planning this all along—these two men together felt so much like divinity, a preordained event.

For as long as Will had known Hannibal, he had always experienced the same feeling when he and Hannibal occupied the same room. A type of ease bordered with slight anticipation of missing him, leaving significant yearning gaps when they were apart.

Now that they were physically together—touch adding severity to their intimacy—the feeling had intensified. He was already attached to the added level of Hannibal's presence and found it debilitating to think he could be without it again.

He wanted to be touched like this always, never leaving him, somehow replacing the way Cooper had touched him with this moment—this bliss.

Cooper's touch was cold and shameful.

Even laying there, Will was apprehensive—a learned worry that any embrace of motion would become something he didn't ask for or want. And even though he had never spoken it, Hannibal knew.

The intention meant everything to Will.

The way Hannibal took care of even the worst things, even his evil seemed like a laborious act of love.

Will couldn't surrender to Cooper because Cooper never asked him to. He demanded Will's unconditional surrender, and force is not an act of submission. He couldn't hand over what was never properly asked for.

Right now, Hannibal was asking, and all Will wanted to do was relinquish.

"Are you certain of this, Will? Is this what you want?" Hannibal asked softly.

Will nodded slowly, leaning in to press teasing kisses to Hannibal's upper lip. "I want your hands." He said, scooting in, hovering over his mouth. "I want your body. I think about this all the time, about you, about your hair—your smell. The way you touch so tenderly. How steady your hands can be."

Hannibal's head fell away, dropping to his back as Will followed in a kiss, leg draped across his thigh, now slotting between Hannibal's knees. He rolled his hips, rutting his hard bulge against the man's hip.

"You make me so hard, Hannibal," He said, sending his face into Hannibal's neck, listening as the man growled low. He caressed the broad, heavy chest, feeling the fibers under his fingers, flicking the hard nipple before moving down his torso, searching for his erection.

"Hannibal," Will said gently as he swiped a hand across another small damp patch, "What is this?"

Hannibal bent up his body, ready to brush Will off politely yet exposedly, not quite embarrassed but perfectly aware of how the next moments might follow.

“Shhh,” Will whispered, brushing his lips over the small section of Hannibal’s skin, kissing lightly to raise the flesh and calm the concern. “Just let me see.” He said quietly, undoing the button and zipper of Hannibal’s pants.

Hannibal inhaled through his nose, head falling back against the floor, an unclenched hand resting on Will’s exposed shoulder.

The fingers were delicate in their exploration, light like bristols of a paintbrush, simple and direct in how they were applied over the sticky texture of Hannibal’s boxer briefs.

Will had to close his eyes when he felt the hard length, the part of Hannibal’s body he had yet to know was now a fabric width away from his grasp. He clenched around it, just as much as he could over the elastic of the textile, eliciting another inhale, sharp and quick. Will inched closer on his elbow, tucking himself next to Hannibal’s chest.

“Did you cum?” Will asked, sweeping a tongue over the exposed nipple, slick saliva dragging across the course chest hairs.

Hannibal shook his head gently, Will looking up under his eyelashes to see the large man melted into himself, drawing stiffness between Will’s legs seeing Hannibal in such a state, brought on by Will’s power that is applied with little to no effort.

“You’re just wet?”

“Mmmm,” Hannibal hummed in affirmation.

Will slipped his fingertips under the brim of Hannibal’s briefs, the rest of the hand following, clutching the cock in earnest. Will’s head dropped back, then bobbed forward again. “Christ—Hannibal. You are—really wet.” Will chuckled, dragging his thumb across the head, moving in a small circle, then bringing his hands down in a single stroke.

Hannibal opened his eyes with a small smile.

Their smiles met, lips tenderly pressing together in simple kisses.

“Does it make you wet when I talk like that?”

Hannibal brushed back a loose curl from Will’s forehead, cherry red eyes almost pulsating under the afternoon sun. “Everything about you arouses me, Will.” He said through soft pecks of his lips. “Your voice,” He pressed, “Your hands. Your body.” He softly licked across Will’s lower lip. “Tell me more about what you like.”

Will’s brow turned, mouth open, retracting his hand and reaching down to touch his own cock over the front of his jeans with a soft gasp. The pressure was too intense.

“I like your wet cock,” Will huffed.

Watching Will start to writhe, Hannibal tempted the boy to continue by taking his dick in hand.

Hannibal lazily stroked himself, filling his eyes with the sweet excitement radiating from Will's body when he unzipped his fly, dipping into his briefs and scooping out a lovely pink cock, rubbery, curving up toward his belly.

Hannibal released a low groan when he saw it, mesmerized, he wet his bottom lip.

"Touch yourself," He uttered low.

Will obeyed, watching his hand slowly travel over his own shaft, extreme striking pleasure hitting his low spine when his eyes darted to Hannibal, mirroring his movements.

"Fuck—" He huffed, hunger siphoning all the sensation from his stomach, struck by an undeniable craving for Hannibal's cum.

Will released himself and adjusted, sitting on the side of his hip and dipping down—he brought his mouth to Hannibal's cock, exposed as it stood almost perfectly erect, the tantalizing shade of arousal. It was the same size as Cooper's but delectably fuller, with a texture and shape that Will liked.

The soft pink tip of his tongue made contact with the weeping head, dragging a dramatically slow lick across the top. He retracted his head, looking down at Hannibal to receive the devilishly delighted gaze when he swallowed the streak of precum.

Pride bloomed inside Hannibal's chest, Will's first taste surging to his hips, making him buck a shudder.

Held firm by the base, Will sent his legs next to Hannibal's torso, folding onto Hannibal's lap to give a better show. A second drag, fingers delicately holding the shaft in place, Will's tongue made a line from base to head, sending sparks of pleasure to Hannibal's balls, forcing another large gob of slick from the head in a mild pulse.

Will tended to the leak by unhinging his jaw, drawing back the skin, and encasing the spongy head with his blush lips. Hannibal tasted so much better than Cooper—a dullness with a shimmering aftertaste, each drop like sparkling water.

An appreciative hand landed on Will's thigh, smoothing over the front of his jeans. Will's legs slumped open, allowing and encouraging, only to stop suddenly when Hannibal reached his cock. He popped off and looked down.

Hannibal abruptly looked at him. "Is this alright?" he asked.

Will blinked, pausing in uncertainty.

Hannibal saw the way his breath hitched, the swallow that moved his adam's apple, ashamed of his own apprehension. Will didn't yet understand—because Cooper may have never shown him—that it was ok not to want something while still enjoying himself.

Hannibal pulled his hands down to Will's calves, rubbing small circles with his hands.

"Are you feeling vulnerable, Will?"

Will's nipples perked, hubris tickling his stomach, feeling self-important, that perhaps what he wanted was worthy. It made him harder.

"I—I don't know," He replied.

Hannibal's hands returned to Will's cock, tentative and slow, letting it rest against his palm.

Will sat into his elbows, looking down through his tucked chin. His insides tightened, abdomen clenching when Hannibal's extended lips ghosted over his shaft, opening wide and releasing a hot breath over the length.

Will trembled.

"We'll try a different approach then," Hannibal pulled up off the floor. He dropped his pants, then inserted his fingers under the brim of Will's unclasped jeans. "Do you trust me?" He asked.

Will nodded.

Hannibal removed the trousers and fell to his knees to straddle Will. He shifted up, long cock clumsily bumping Will's as he adjusted into place. The nervousness in Will's stomach started to dissipate, deep breaths returning to his lungs as his hands held Hannibal's sturdy thighs lightly, feeling safe beneath Hannibal's stern dominance.

"You've been allowed to tease for far too long," Hannibal said, a coaxing hand brushing across the reflective scar on Will's stomach, drawing a clench from Will's hips.

Will saw the tease. "I'd suggest you claim what you want before someone else takes it away." He said through soft, begging eyes.

The smile darkened on Hannibal's face, the openly defiant boy pressing his luck. This was a test, and Hannibal realized how eager the boy below him was asking for dominance, protection, assertion—a father.

"Is that what you want, Will? Cooper to walk in—to take you away?" Hannibal asked, posting up over Will, teeth grazing the collar bone, drawing a soft gasp. "He can put his hands on you," he said, bearing down on Will's hips, "but he can not have you."

Will grabbed Hannibal's neck, pressing their foreheads together, desperately gazing into Hannibal's very soul. "I don't want him to have me, Hannibal." He uttered in a wet choke.

Hannibal contained the tremble that threatened his chin, eyes filling with moisture. He sat up and sent his heavy hand down to Will's chest, large and flat, containing so much, and softly teased at Will's nipple.

Chin chasing the sky, Will tried to roll his hips again, yearning for the hot cock that laid next to his, but Hannibal clenched his hips, pinning him down harder.

“Whose body do you feel when he thrusts into you?” Hannibal asked through an authoritative gaze, “Whose cock do imagine when your throat grows sore?”

Yes—Will thought—*more.*

“Yours,” He whispered.

Hannibal rewarded the answer by containing both their shafts in his hand, stroking enough to slick Will with his precum.
“Ah!” Will bowed up, watching Hannibal work. “Yes, I like that.”

Hannibal pinned one of Will’s wrists to the floor, hovering over his face, pulling more pressure into Will’s cock with a slow edge. “I know your body, Will. I’ve been inside it.”

Will’s brow winced, reaching up for soft kisses as a hot flush filled his chest, neck, and face. “More,” He whispered, “please.”

It was almost too much for Hannibal to contain, finding his own face tense from watching the man below him relinquish all his power—ask so politely. He quickened his pace and tightened his grip around both shafts, soaking his hand in clear fluid.

“Do you imagine me inside you, Will?”

“Ah—fuck—yes, I do.”

“Do my groans make you cum?” Hannibal asked, feeling Will’s balls tighten, hips contracted tightly beneath him. “Do you wish it were you when you hear us from down the hall?”

“Uh-huh.” Will barely managed, sweat collecting on his forehead and clavicle.

“What was that?”

“Yes.” Will huffed.

“I can’t hear you, William.”

“*FUCK DADDY YES!*”

Hannibal fell forward—the unexpected word made him cum instantly, shooting up Will’s chest, hitting his neck. Will shuttered out a broken moan as he came immediately after. The large hand continued to stroke through his orgasm.

“Empty for me, beautiful boy.”

Will watched the pulsing cum spill out of his cock, encased by Hannibal’s hand, almost getting hard again at the sight of semen being commanded out of his body.

Hannibal loosened his grip, using only fingers to pet the oversensitive skin. He shifted his legs, and brought his mouth down, starting at Will's balls, cupping with a meticulous tongue as he cleaned the cum from every surface it hit.

Will remained pent up, face begging when Hannibal was finished, darting his tongue into the open mouth when it pressed against his, desperately taking small samplings of his own taste.

Hannibal purred, kissing him harder, clutching the back of his head to support him when his body fell limp.

They collapsed onto the floor, staring at the ceiling fan, huffing heavy breaths.

Moments later, Will started to laugh.

Hannibal smiled. "What is it?" He said, looking over to the chuckling boy, beautiful in his afterglow.

Will rolled his head back and forth slowly, "I didn't know it could feel like that," He breathed.

Hannibal bore all his teeth in the widest smile he could remember.

Will was his.

They laid there in the afternoon sun for as long as it beamed through the window. They jerked off twice more, Hannibal on his knees between Will's legs on the couch, helping by sucking between Will's strokes. The second time was after two whiskeys when Will got hard thinking about the first time, and he sat on the couch, legs spread, doing it while Hannibal watched.

4.

Gustav was plucked from the crowd because he was susceptible to manipulation. His insecurities were like open wounds, Hannibal like a virus, and all he had to do was have someone exchange them through a crowd.

Hannibal infected him quickly—a positive result for Hannibal.

Without Will's jealousy, Will may have never realized his true desires and love. Gustav served as a catalyst—a green monster added to the mixed drink of Hannibal and Will's cohabitation. Keeping him around was necessary in case he was needed, but quite quickly, he grew expectations that interrupted Hannibal's ventures.

“Gustav. I wasn’t expecting you.” Hannibal said, yanking open the gold rattling gate after reluctantly buzzing him up.

Gustav stepped off the elevator with his arms folded tightly across his body. “I figured that, Han,” He said, peering into the living room where a shirtless Will was asleep on the couch.

Hannibal remained uninviting, body blocking in a mild-mannered way so he could keep Gustav in the foyer. “Is there something I can do for you?” He asked without expression.

Gus rolled his eyes in a huff. “Is there something you can do for me? I’m not a solicitor, Hannibal. Can I come in and talk?” He asked in a way that wasn’t really a question but more of a demand, trying to take another step into the apartment.

“This isn’t the best time.” Hannibal asserted, putting a hand out to stop Gustav from continuing.

Smarmy eyes darting to the blocking hand, the thoroughly perturbed Gus pushed it away. “I’ll be quick,” he spat, brushing past Hannibal, walking down to his room, and sitting on the bed.

Hannibal took a long blink, looked over at Will dozing on the couch, and decided he’d spare five minutes before either kicking Gustav out or killing him. He made his way to the bedroom, pulling the door to but not closing it—in case Will should wake in a curious state—and addressed the man who sat on the edge of the bed, arms and legs crossed, an overstuffed keyring dangling from his thumb.

“What is this about?” Hannibal asked quickly.

Gus looked up at him with his dark brown eyes, rocking his foot—both nervous and angry. “When I spent the night last night—when I was drunk,” He started.

“I recall, Gustav. It was only last night.” Hannibal pushed, trying to get him to the point.

“Well—I forgot my phone when I left. I came back to get it, and I buzzed for the longest time.” He said with a dramatic pause. “No one answered. I needed my phone—obviously—so I went around to try the fire escape, and you know what I saw?”

“You’ll—”

“Your roommate isn’t just your roommate, is he?” Gustav tersely asked.

Hannibal blinked softly and slid his hands into his pockets, remaining stoic and innocent. He said nothing.

Gustav, however, continued in full force. “Your roommate is your fuck buddy. Or are you in love with him?”

“I don’t imagine your perception of events is accurate.”

“Yes, well. He was on your lap, kissing you. That seems to be plain facts. So, if you’d like to explain how that happened, then perhaps my perceptions would change.”

“I’ve made it clear where our relationship stands, Gustav.” Hannibal calmly stated. “I don’t have to explain my daily actions nor the standings of my personal relationships.”

“You don’t—but uh—” The pause Gus gave was long enough for Hannibal to understand where this conversation was headed. “Will has a boyfriend. He might have to explain the *standings of his personal relationships*.”

“Not to me. And certainly not to you.”

“But maybe Cooper, yes?” Gus said with a snarky scrunch of his nose.

Hannibal considered him, thinking mildly that Gustav should be careful with his following words. “What is it that you want, Gustav?” he asked quietly.

Gustav rolled his eyes so hard that he almost fell back on the bed. He sighed hard and dropped his hands to his lap. “I want you to dedicate yourself to our relationship, Han.”

“And you believe blackmail the best method of winning my affection?”

“I know it will win your attention.” Gustav was keener than Hannibal had given him credit for. Not that it meant much to Hannibal, because Hannibal didn’t take kindly to threats. “If you stop whatever arrangement you have with Will, then I won’t tell Cooper.” Gus finished.

Hannibal released an amused smile. “I feel it fair to warn you that if you are to make this ultimatum, there will be consequences.” He stated.

“Consequences?” Gus asked with a sharply twisted brow.

“You are not bound to lie for anyone, Gustav. Feel free to honor whatever moral system you see fit.”

Gustav stood, a look of disgust coating his face. “We have dinner reservations tomorrow at 8:00.” He brushed past Hannibal once more, pausing only a moment to put a stiff finger into Hannibal’s chest. “You owe me.”

Gustav left.

Hannibal would never make it to dinner and at the time, he had no idea how profound that mistake would be.

THE WELL

1.

Here, it changes.

You're making your choice, Billy Boy.

Let him fall. Soon, he'll see.

Soon, he'll see.

Soon, he'll see.

The voices were an entity set in the back of his mind, a personality the building had assumed.

"Shut up."

Will blinked his eyes open.

Did he say that out loud? He thought he did.

Heavy from a deep sleep, Will shifted his head where it rested against Hannibal's arm. His cheek was plastered to the man's skin, and he moved just enough to loosen the sticky fastening.

He was tired—head still spinning from the day before.

They had fallen asleep on the couch. Or—Will had fallen asleep on the couch, and Hannibal had joined him. He couldn't entirely remember. The truth was, he didn't really care. His naked body was curled inside Hannibal's embrace, which was enough for him.

He blinked a few more times, looking up at Hannibal's sleeping face.

Hot breath exited through the man's barely parted lips. Left agape the entire night to snore, his mouth had a smell. It was morning breath in its truest form, but it was also moist and dark. Floral, perhaps.

Will wasn't sure if he had ever really noticed.

While his obsession with Hannibal's body in its natural state was obvious, Will had never truly tended to it with self-awareness. He never filtered through the thoughts or contemplations to decipher their meaning. Even now, lying beside a slumbering demon, he had trouble understanding it. He had no idea why his heart grew beyond its capacity, the flesh stretching to contain every powerful sensation pumping through it like blood.

His eyes scanned Hannibal's face.

Sliced lines of stone skin cut through existence at sharp angles—the nose, the cheeks, the jaw—a vision of fortitude that was nearly impenetrable. Along the facade, however, two vulnerabilities surrounded an almost missable entrance—the soft darkness residing inside.

Will brought his fingertip to Hannibal's upper lip, ghosting over it, mesmerized.

Beautiful—he thought.

Will smiled to himself and lazily kissed the morning mouth, plump like rose petals.

For so long, he had wondered if he would kiss Hannibal or if Hannibal would kiss him. Some part of him had always been curious, even in the moments he denied himself such truth. Now that he knew how perfect it could be, he never wanted to stop.

Unable and unwilling to restrain himself, he reached up with listless soft suctions and brought the sleeping evil into the waking world.

The monster stirred.

Will paused and peered up through his lashes to find Hannibal looking back at him through narrow slits beneath heavy eyelids.

"Good morning," Hannibal uttered low, the words vibrating in his chest like bass through a speaker.

"Hey you," Will whispered back, gentle happiness breaking his cheeks into another smile.

Hannibal mirrored the grin as he brushed back a few of Will's chocolate curls, eyes glinting with adoration. He leaned in and collected Will's lips, continuing what the young man had started, wrapping a leg behind Will's knee to draw their bodies closer.

It was such a simple thing—laying together under the knitted throw, skin to skin, the whurring fan bringing a fresh chill to the room.

Why hadn't it started this way?

What had they been so scared of?

The heartache?

Will could not—at that moment—fathom a pain so wretched that it rendered this kiss obsolete. He was content to receive the negative repercussions so long as he could keep this.

"How are you feeling?" Hannibal asked, interrupting the exchange to nuzzle against Will's face.

"I'm fine," Will said impatiently, eager for affection, moving down to continue kissing Hannibal's neck and clavicle.

“You seemed to sleep well,” Hannibal replied, tilting his head back slightly to receive each of Will’s sweet tokens.

“More or less,” Will replied between presses, trailing across the bare shoulder.

Hannibal slid his fingers through Will’s hair, raking the delicate strands against the webbing of his hands. “What’s troubling you?” He asked.

“Mmmm,” Will hummed, lips occupied.

Hannibal’s hand stopped its motions. “Are you apprehensive?”

The insatiable young man nuzzled into the nape of Hannibal’s neck, voice slightly muffled, “I think I’m pretty enthusiastic, actually.” He said, lips pulling another wet suck.

Despite the sensation, Hannibal reeled his neck back and looked down, connecting with Will’s eye line. “What is it?” He asked.

It would have been easy to roll his eyes, scoff and suck his teeth, but Will found the truth too difficult to ignore. Hannibal *was* accurately sensing apprehension inside his temperament.

Will was worried about the absence.

He had tried to avoid the sensation of longing—the dreaded anticipation of separating. He knew how it tainted all present joy, but couldn’t help himself. It was a learned thing—innate almost.

A hallway was the only distance Will had the emotional capacity to endure. Even the miles between his apartment and the shipyard seemed like an endless expanse with a million snares, each inch threatening to divide them forever.

Going back to his relationship with Cooper was the largest looming gap. He would return from his business trip to DC in four days.

It *seemed* like so much time. Then again, it *didn’t seem* like enough time.

It doesn’t seem like enough time because it isn’t enough time—Will thought.

If it weren’t an eternity, it would never be enough.

“I don’t want this to end,” Will admitted.

Hannibal continued to pet his curly hair, soothing him with near shivers. It made him feel like a dog in the best possible way.

“This doesn’t have to end, Will.” Hannibal replied, looking down at the man in his arms.

Will stared at a misshaped freckle on Hannibal’s neck as he spoke. “Cooper will be back in a few days.”

“Do you intend to stay with him?”

The frustrating thought made Will’s sternum itch. He rolled back into the couch cushions, hand lazily rubbing his eyes as he looked up toward the ceiling. “I have to,” he sighed.

What short and heavy words.

The dizzying notion that Will would stay with Cooper, even after the spiraling events that marked the past several months, clearly indicated that Will was trapped.

Hannibal wasn’t sure about the motive.

Perhaps he was trapped by his own desperate need for love or his unrelenting dedication to the semblance of normalcy. It wasn’t uncommon for Will to send his frantic arms out, grabbing things that weren’t good for him in an attempt to find balance.

However, this was something else entirely.

It seemed like Will was at the bottom of a well with no means of climbing out, calling for help despite how the high walls silenced his screams. Hannibal could hear him, but he could not reach him.

“You have dominion over your life, Will,” Hannibal said with certainty. “You aren’t required to do anything you don’t choose.”

Will closed his eyes and curled back into Hannibal’s chest, burrowing lightly into the comforting bed of hair. He pressed another kiss over the coarse filaments, “What I choose?” he said, opening his mouth to tease a bite at Hannibal’s skin, blinking up to catch the older man watching.

“Yes,” Hannibal replied, restraining his breath as he reiterated the sincerity of a previous promise. “I’d grant any wish. You need only ask.”

The pale blue irises flitted back and forth between Hannibal’s burgundy gaze—awe-stricken.

It was almost real.

Hannibal was an unrelenting evil that encompassed everything Will had ever known himself to be—a vile protection. Somehow, sitting inside Hannibal’s vast control, Will felt liberation was possible. Perhaps there was a way out.

Then and there, he made a choice. It was a decision appointed from perfect clarity, provoked by a conscious awakening, full to the brim with a feeling Will could only describe as love.

“I want you inside me,” he said with whispering severity. He clutched the back of Hannibal’s neck, bringing their foreheads together. “I want you deeper than Cooper can reach,” he said, breath hitching over every vowel.

Hannibal tightened his arms around Will’s desperate body. “Give yourself to me.” He uttered into Will’s open mouth. “I’ll take care of you.”

There's no going back

Will pressed into Hannibal's lips. Fire flushed between them—assertion, affirmation—pushing and pulling in a passionate exchange. Hannibal's hand brushed down Will's back to rest on the cresting hill of his ass. His fingers sank into the pliable flesh to take a handful.

Arousal forced their bodies to adjust. Neither man could help how their hips rolled, mouths watering when their cocks tracked against each other.

Will quickly shifted, rolling over, nose gently bending as his face pressed against the leather couch cushions. He reached back for Hannibal's body, finger collecting mounds of skin, drawing him closer.

Driven by the possessive desire to encompass, Hannibal scooped in behind him. His hands explored the young, supple skin—the creamy thigh, rigid hipbone, tight oblique, mounding chest. His fingers stopped—patient in their application—over the erect pink nipple, offering a combination of pinches and pulls.

Will writhed against him, breath pithy.

So long—too long— they waited on the edge of this moment with a thudding heartbeat, overtaken now that it had arrived. Will found he couldn't contain a stoic composure, his body quaking as Hannibal touched it.

"You're trembling," Hannibal whispered as he fervently kissed up the column of Will's neck.

"I'm sorry," Will nervously replied, hesitating.

"Do you want me to stop?" Hannibal asked.

Will's rough fingers reached back and curled around the back of the large man's neck. "No," He whispered, head turned to ghost over Hannibal's lips.

The large muscular arms tightened around Will's torso to hold him steady. One commanding hand came to apply subtle force to Will's neck, threatening the airway without blocking it.

The work of a surgeon's hands.

"Shhh," He whispered, mouth pinned to Will's ear. "I have you."

Steady your hands before you begin.

Hannibal felt himself float into a moment of intrinsic reflection. It was nothing more than an inhale, one second when Hannibal was utterly inside his own flesh. His heart stopped, all internal noise silenced, and he connected to his focused mind, channeling skill toward the actions of each hand. Then, with clear intention, he returned to reality, prepared to open pink flesh, desperate to feel the life force inside.

Together, Hannibal and Will began the process of internal change.

The large man rolled his hips, rubbing his cock against Will's ass, goading his shaft to thicken.

Will gently whined, a puff of vapor collecting onto the leather cushion. He had a hunger for Hannibal's cock, for Hannibal to fuck him, for Hannibal to take up every empty space—to fill him. That guttural desire moved inside him. His musculature, slim and sturdy, submitted to the seductive ways it begged for friction.

He sent his hips back, rolling his ass against Hannibal as the monstrous man fisted his giant cock against Will's low back. He huffed and stroked until precum leaked a thick pool onto Will's milky skin, stopping only to spread the tepid fluid across his ass, slipping his wet fingers through Will's crease.

Hannibal ignited with possessive pride watching his own slick lubricate Will, preparing him to open. He would mark every pore with his scent, remove Cooper's hold and replace him with permanence.

Meet your new god.

He moved his knee between Will's legs to pin over the couch, giving his hands more room to work. Will's soaking hole winked beneath Hannibal's index finger, inviting it to slide in slowly.

"*Ahchrist*," Will slammed a bracing hand into the couch. His dick prickled with hot pressure, searing straight through him.

"Tell me what he would call you," Hannibal murmured into Will's ear, plucking out the source of intimate decay. He breathed over the flesh between his neck and shoulder, bringing his teeth to nibble lightly.

Will huffed, chasing the finger that plunged in and out of him, trying to remember every demeaning name Cooper used. "My Pretty Will," He managed to reply.

"*My Pretty Will*," Hannibal repeated, placing an unoccupied hand over the scar on Will's belly.

Will arched into his back, the tone and timbre of Hannibal's voice suddenly replacing every scarred memory of Cooper's voice. He rutted into the stuffed leather, humping mercilessly within his limited range of motion, cockhead weeping enough to leave a shiny trail on the rich umber.

Hannibal quickly inhibited his movements, fucking a second finger into his ass.

Will tried to reach down and touch his overstimulated shaft, only to have Hannibal swat his hand away. Balls tense, hips twitching, Hannibal had only to bite down on Will's neck, and the cock head released another dribbling leak.

The large man added a third digit, finding the hole now receptive, relaxed, and pliant. He pressed against Will's swollen prostate, petting it with delicate applications.

Will's body shook, driving his desire to an unbearable level.

"*That's it*," Hannibal encouraged, mirroring Cooper's words, killing their power like vinegar on a weed.

Cooper Kennedy receded from Will's mind, diminished and faded, and Will became more aroused than he had been in over a year. Free from the terror, safe inside that tightly shared space, Will opened up entirely—laid bare inside Hannibal's hold.

The scent of anxiety dissipated, his heartbeats slowed, and his lungs filled, then emptied at a normal speed.

Will was ready.

Hannibal removed his fingers and rolled Will back inside his arms, maneuvering the young man to straddle his lap. It was mind-numbing how easily Hannibal handled Will's body, smooth and graceful, purposefully placing him in the position he needed.

Hannibal sat up and held Will with fevered gentility, peering up with his cherry-red eyes.

Tart medicine.

Will wanted to taste it.

He sat up on his knees, grabbing Hannibal's slick cock at the base to align it with his eager hole. Hot skin against hot skin, Will slowly sank his weight until he felt the plump head pop inside.

Coated in slick, his hand heedlessly braced against Hannibal's chest as he huffed a quiet moan. His fingers threaded through the thick chest hair without thinking, and when he realized what he had done, arousal sparked through his balls.

Hannibal's scent compounded, his hair and skin coated in his own precum. He took a fistful of the wet chest and held on, ready for more.

"Slowly," Hannibal instructed.

Mouth open, cheeks flushed, Will sank down the length in small increments, face surrendering as his ass filled to capacity. Flashing hot euphoria leeched from his skin like sweat.

God, Hannibal's cock was so big. It pressed against his walls, tempted his boundaries, expanded him until no gaps were left. Once his ass met Hannibal's hips, they sat there, looking at each other through a languid gaze.

Hannibal's breath grew shallow, fast, taking in air as he felt the devilish wet fever of Will's tight ass, yielding to him just as flesh yields to the blade. He had to take a moment, resting his face against Will's hairless chest and lazily kissing the skin while he regained control.

It was perfect bliss.

“Daddy,” Will whispered into Hannibal’s ear, fingers interlacing the short silver hairs on the back of the man’s neck.

Hannibal reeled back, looking deep into the blush blue eyes, scattered flecks of brown and yellow like nebulas. “What did you say?” He uttered back, mouth hovering over Will’s.

“Daddy,” Will said under hooded lids, grinding once slowly, making Hannibal’s chin raise in pleasure.

“Mylimasis,” Hannibal whispered through a soft exhale. “Say it again.” He commanded, rolling his hips, sending his shaft deeper into Will as the younger man dropped his jaw in a silent moan, not breaking eye contact for a second.

“Daddy.” He said, louder and with more yearning force.

Watching such a beautiful, enigmatic creature choose him and only him was beyond anything Hannibal had ever predicted for his life. He had conceived it, perhaps, but he was unprepared for its gravity. Will had exposed his vulnerabilities, presenting the festering rot inside, asking Hannibal to go in and remove it, forever replacing the void with what should have always been there—his heart.

Hannibal found his resolve crumble. Wet heat welled up behind his eyes, glossing them over until the dam finally broke, and a glistening streak created the hill of his cheek.

Will’s brow furrowed. He used the soft blade of his thumb to brush the tear from Hannibal’s face. “Why are you crying?” He asked tenderly.

Hannibal swallowed. “I’m in love with you, Will,” He stated, sounding so unlike a monster.

Will nodded, his eyes welling with tingling moisture, lip trembling softly. He started to roll his hips once more.

“Then show me,” He said.

A snarl curled Hannibal’s cupid bow, baring the tips of his teeth. He grunted salaciously and forced Will down onto the couch. The feisty boy—constantly antagonizing, begging for more. Hannibal collected his lips in a light kiss as he started to thrust.

“Ahchrist!” Will moaned out, body twisted and bent. “Yes!”

Hannibal pinned Will’s legs to his torso, thighs cradled inside his muscular arm, and quickened his pace, sitting back up to fuck into Will with force.

“No one will love you as I do,” He said, sliding a hand over Will’s scar. “No one will open you as I do.”

Will's body bounced against Hannibal’s in loud smacks, curls plastered to his sticky forehead, abdominal muscles clenched as he watched the large cock enter and exit him.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes sir,” Will huffed, unable to do anything else.

Hannibal grabbed Will’s bouncing dick and expertly pulled at a pace too good to be true, making slick sounds as it moved up and down.

Will’s orgasm rose like a demonic monster, razor-sharp talons clawing up inside his body, twinging and scratching, poking his tender wet flesh, begging through bated whispers to be unleashed.

Let me out.

“I’mgunnacum,” Will stuttered between moans.

Hannibal grunted hard, beading sweat, eyes dark and growling deep with each thrust.

“Cum for me, sweet boy. Cum while I cum inside you,”

Will opened his mouth, twisting his face, neck veins bulging only to have Hannibal returning the expression, both men moaning loudly into each other’s open mouths as they climaxed, shooting hard, cresting each other in warm milky ropes.

One by one, the aftershock pulsed and dissipated. Hannibal pecked at Will’s lips as the rush left and reality returned, and they were forced to physically separate. It was a small reassurance.

They would do this over, and over, and over...and over.

They were going to have sex on every surface of that apartment.

If Cooper Kennedy were to touch anything, his hands would be marked by the long-standing memory of Hannibal and Will’s devotion to each other.

The stains of sweet and sticky love.

2

The egg timer made a trilling chime, signaling the end of the Asso Buco’s residency inside the oven. Hannibal dawned his mitts and pulled out the ruby red roasting pan, the lid containing the sound of a crackling simmer.

That evening, Hannibal prepared the dish Will had requested, and as traditional and simple as it may have been, Hannibal was happy to oblige.

The past two days had been blissful. Sharing an apartment had brought them closer, true enough, but nothing would ever match the level of intimacy that came with sampling a domestic life. Everything, from the split bedrooms to the last inches of private skin, were

now shared. Hannibal and Will were connected in every facet of their lives. The two individual existences fell by the wayside to make room for a singular being—the person they were together.

Once, the very prospect of such communion was terrifying. Hannibal had trouble resolving how he might exist in a relationship that had such potentially devastating consequences.

Will had hurt him. He had hurt Will.

Neither of those things were easy to cast aside or forget.

Now, Hannibal understood some things hurt worse than treachery—cut deeper than betrayal. He had watched Will struggle, saw how the world could take advantage of such a magnificent radiance, squandering all its promise and diminishing it to nothing.

Hannibal Lecter knew that there was nothing more terrifying in this world than having to watch helplessly while the love of his life was snuffed out at the hands of another.

That would no longer happen. He would assure this relationship was nurtured and he would protect Will by any means necessary.

He checked the stove clock.

7:30PM

He'd been gone several hours, and dinner was nearly ready.

The listless Saturday had been spent lounging, talking, and fucking. Everything was seemingly perfect when, rather abruptly, Will returned from a brief sit on the fire escape and left the apartment unannounced.

That was three hours ago.

Hannibal was about to adopt a mild worry when he heard the elevator engine ignite.

A soft smile crested his lips, and he returned to his task of plating dinner.

The gate squealed open and shut. Keys jangled into the bowl. Shoes dropped to the floor. Will appeared through the kitchen door, and Hannibal looked over at the young man, radiantly beaming like the sunshine—a small bag dangling from his fingers.

"I thought you were gone for the evening," Hannibal said, wiping his hands on his apron.

"No, I uh—I went out to get something," Will replied with an intoxicating smarminess to his handsome, smiling face. He strode over to Hannibal like a cat who got the cream.

Hannibal grinned—curious. He untied his apron, folded it neatly, and dropped it behind him. This was interesting, exciting, and sweet. Hannibal approached Will, who stood patiently, hands clasped behind him.

“First,” Will said, bringing his fingers to his ear where they retrieved the single small daisy tucked behind it. He presented it to Hannibal with a smile. Hannibal went to take it, but Will playfully snatched it away. “Ah-ah,” he said, the tricky devil in his eyes, “I need payment for the last bouquet you wasted.”

Hannibal remained thoroughly amused but had no idea what type of payment Will was requesting. He was about to say so when, quite adorably, Will leaned forward and presented his lips like a fish.

Hannibal beamed brighter than anything in the known universe. He was not shy to offer what was owed. Taking both and clutching Will’s face, he pressed a passionate kiss on the blush mouth, creating a seductive exchange just before pulling away.

Will blinked as he meagerly stumbled, body shocked by an offer he wasn’t expecting.

“Well,” He said, clearing his throat. “That’s good enough for now.” He blinked a few times, then took the daisy and slid it behind Hannibal’s ear. “Now that you’re all paid up,” Will said, plopping the gift bag onto the kitchen island.

Hannibal looked at it but didn’t move.

Will eyed the bag. “I bought you something,” he said, two fingers nudging the gift toward Hannibal.

“What is it?” Hannibal asked.

Will chuckled, sucking his teeth in jest. “Open it, Hannibal. Shit.” He smiled.

It was rare for Hannibal to receive gifts, especially in this life. He had to admit, this was a delightful surprise, no matter what the package contained. Accepting the thoughtful act, he reached inside the light blue bag and pulled out a long velvet box, held closed by two sterling silver hinges. His thumbs simultaneously flicked the latches, and he opened the box to find a thin, twisted gold chain sitting on a bed of buttery soft silk.

He held it up to the light and then looked at Will.

“You uh—you don’t belong to Gustav,” Will said sheepishly, cheek pinned in a half-smile. “You belong to me.”

At that moment, Hannibal decided that the only way that chain would ever leave his neck was by decapitation.

He held it out. Will took it and clasped it around Hannibal’s neck. He took his long, delicate finger blades and gently tapped the resting jewelry, suddenly a new man. The gold chain sat like a ring of ownership, barely noticeable around his tawny neck, glinting as subtle reminders.

“I have something for you as well,” Hannibal admitted.

“What?”

The dark man slyly smiled, holding up one finger. “Just a moment.” He said, quickly leaving the room.

“Hannibal!” Will called after him with a chuckle. “This was just a gesture.” He said more quietly.

Hannibal returned, a giddy pep to his graceful steps. “Here,” he said, extending a small mahogany box to Will.

Bashful and full of gratitude, Will accepted without looking up. He pried open the lid, and that expanding heart of his nearly burst.

They hadn’t told each other about these tokens—never mentioned it even once— but somehow, they both knew.

Inside the box was a watch—not any watch—a watch made for Will. It was a swiss timepiece, pearlescent cobalt face with thin gold detailing, ‘*Graham*’ stamped beneath the logo—monogrammed just for him.

Will emptied the contents into his hand and inspected the item further, astounded by the specific design choices that echoed his personality exactly.

“You didn’t have to do this,” Will said, exchanging the phrase as a courtesy because he didn’t know what else to say.

All this time, Hannibal had paid attention to every detail of Will’s life, right down to the watch Cooper had given him and the conflicting feelings Will had toward an item he knew he shouldn’t love.

“His brand marks you no longer,” Hannibal said, taking the watch from Will’s hand and sliding it over his wrist, clasping the band to the perfect fit. “You belong to me.”

Will let the gift fall to his thumb knuckle, admiring it through a few light jangles.

“I can’t wear this, you know,” Will said. “Cooper will see.”

“I know,” Hannibal replied, sliding his hands around Will’s body. “But you can wear it now.” He kissed the illustrious young man with all the love inside him.

Will put both arms around Hannibal’s neck, hoisting himself from the floor, and wrapped his legs around the large man’s waist.

“Take me to bed.” He whispered.

That night as Hannibal fucked him, the dangling necklace jostled softly, and Will clutched to Hannibal’s skin, the watch adorning his wrist.

That night, they would let go and enjoy each other.

And that night, two dinners would go uneaten.

3.

The morning sunlight had not yet heated to warmth. It was still white, harnessing power as the hours went by until it could finally beam through the windows in Hannibal's bedroom. There was a damp silence in the apartment. Not even the dust had woken to dance through the rays. The only sound was the light ticking of Hannibal's antique clock—counting the minutes until catastrophe.

Will. Will wake up.

Hurry, Will.

You don't have much time

He's here.

Will's eyes blinked open just slightly, the fog of his mind trying to figure out if Hannibal was saying something to him. He thought Hannibal was saying something, but it didn't sound like Hannibal. Who—

Will abruptly lifted his head, snapping into reality with a violent jolt. His heart pounded loud in his ears, blood rushing through his body in terror.

Like a voice all its own, the rattling elevator screamed across the quiet apartment.

"*Fuck*."

Will flung himself out of bed, hurdling over the chest at the foot, nearly face planting when he slipped.

"Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck"

"Will?" Hannibal said, sitting up. "Will, what's wrong?"

"Cooper's here," Will said in a loud whisper, snatching his joggers from the floor and yanking them on.

Hannibal questioned him. "He's here?"

"The elevator!" Will asserted, pointing at the door as he tried to get his tangled foot through the elastic leghole. "Fuck."

Hannibal got out of bed with quick, calculated grace. He pulled on his pants, tread quietly to the door, and locked it. His ear lightly hovered over the crack to ensure it was the elevator and not another nameless sound.

Will dropped his back against the wall, looking over at Hannibal, chest expanding fast and wide, gasping for air.

The rattling noise was indeed the elevator, and it could only be carrying Cooper. He was the only other person with a set of keys.

Hannibal looked at Will and considered the circumstances.

The worst that could possibly happen was that this would end Will and Cooper's relationship. While it might turn violent, dramatic, or emotional, a bad breakup was not outside the realms of Will's previous life experiences.

Hannibal reached over and put a flat hand over Will's chest, hoping to steady him. His palm was met with thudding, uneven pounds, and a clammy damp had already broken the skin. The young man was sallow, as white as a sheet. His dust blue eyes were misty, the inability to blink stinging the whites with jagged pink lines.

This was not the typical response to being caught mid-affair.

This—this was unmitigated fear. Torrential anxiety. Panic.

"Will," Hannibal spoke honestly, drawing Will from his terror by making eye contact. "Listen to me." He said, hand cupping the side of Will's face. "I can help you. All you have to do is ask."

Will huffed and rolled his eyes. "No, you can't," he said tersely.

Hannibal furrowed his brow. "I can handle him if you'll only let me."

Will sighed and paced away for a step, rubbing his hand over his neck and face. "No, Hannibal. You can't." He said, fingers collecting into a point. "You can't because he knows."

"What do you mean?"

"He knows!" Will exclaimed, hands cutting through the air, eyes shifting all over the place. "He knows who we are—he knows that we're fugitives. If something happens to him, they'll take me away." He said, eyes glossing with moisture. "He'll take me away from you."

Hannibal's face released from the twist of confusion into shocking enlightenment. "How can you be certain?" He asked.

"Because," Will's spat tense and harsh, "because he showed me the files," he took a second and stood, eyes twitching and blinking, "and because he's done this before."

One epiphany drew another. "Why didn't you tell me?" Hannibal asked.

“It doesn’t matter now, Hannibal,” Will said, brushing it off, “I have to get out of here.”

Hannibal had to reset the dynamics in his head, adding the changed variables to the equation to find a new solution.

“Surely, his powers are limited. Would he have you apprehended for having an affair?”

“He’s always said he wouldn’t,” Will said.

“Then there are worse things than him discovering us here.” Hannibal offered.

“Yes, there are.”

Hannibal went to speak—ask what that meant—but it was too late. Any other day, it would have taken ten minutes to open the elevator gate. That day, however, it slid open without so much as a squeak.

“Will!?” Cooper’s voice echoed down the hallway.

Will closed his eyes, dropping his head and shaking it. His life force crumbled in defeat, practically dissolving before Hannibal’s eyes. He went and grabbed a shirt and slid it over his head.

If this were to happen, at least Will could try to make it look as innocent as possible.

Hannibal saw the intention and nodded in agreement. He went to the closet and pulled on slacks and a shirt, giving him a more put-together appearance.

He returned to the door, pressed a final kiss into Will’s lips, then turned the golden knob.

“Lecter!” Cooper said, striding powerfully toward the bedroom. “Is he in there with you!?”

Hannibal held the door, Will hiding behind it.

“He’s not here, Cooper.”

“Bullshit.” Cooper leaned against the doorframe, towering over Hannibal, eyes bulging and red. “I got a phone call.”

“Is that so?” Hannibal said, a genius at stoicism.

“Yeah—from your little boy toy,” Cooper said, taking a finger and jabbing it into Hannibal’s shoulder. “He told me you made out with my boyfriend.” His voice was coated in dramatics. If Cooper knew the truth, there was no reason for him to try and pry it out of Hannibal apart from a desire to inflate his ego by enacting overpowering violence.

Hannibal prepared himself. “You’ve discussed this at length?” He asked.

“With erroneous detail,” Cooper said, standing taller.

“Erroneous?”

“Yeah—*erroneous*,” Cooper replied, matching the insulting inflection, clearly heating around the collar. “Said you got him high.”

Hannibal raised his eyes brows. “Did he?”

Cooper’s neck turned beet red. He raked his hand through his dirty hair, some type of petulant soothing behavior, then looked straight into Hannibal. “You enjoy the manipulation —enjoy taking advantage of him?”

“Is that how Gustav explained it to you?”

“He didn’t have to.” Cooper grew impatient. He took a hand to the door, pushing into it. “Is he in there?”

Hannibal stood firm.

Cooper tried to careen inside. “Will! Come on out, baby. *It’s fine*. I’m not mad.”

Hannibal put his hand on Cooper’s sternum. “I think it’s best if you leave the apartment, Mr. Kennedy.”

Cooper threw off Hannibal’s hand, pointing at him hard. “You’re on thin ice, my friend.”

Hannibal tilted his head, unable to resist such a perfect opportunity to both insult and provoke. “An interesting use of nomenclature.” He said, taking a step forward.

“Fuck you!” Cooper took both hands and shoved Hannibal’s chest with full force, knocking him back and flinging open the door.

He stepped into the room, half expecting to find it empty, taken aback when it wasn’t.

Will stood silently. His heart was pumping hard, muscles heavy with watery adrenaline.

Cooper dropped his head and shook it, chuckling slightly. “Baby—” he seethed, face drawn in anger. He waved his hand, "It’s time to fucking g—"

Hannibal tackled Cooper at the waist.

He heard Will call out, “Hannibal, stop!”

The tall man was just as stout and rigid as he looked, and much to Hannibal’s dismay, knocking him over required more force than Hannibal had applied.

Despite his miscalculation, he drove into his feet and knocked Cooper into the wall. Using the same momentum, he fluidly slid under Cooper’s arm and stood to distend it over his shoulders until the tendons snapped.

“Fuck!” Cooper yelled.

He reeled back his clenched fist and dished a powerful punch to Hannibal's liver. A flood gait of poisoned pain made one of his knees buckle. At the exact moment, inside the millisecond of disorientation, there was an unmistakable ripping sound.

"Cooper! Don't!"

A sputtering series of darting agony tore through Hannibal's body, shredding all his faculties until they surrendered. His legs gave out, and he dropped to the floor.

Later, he would only be able to recall receiving two of the alleged eight fracturing blows before his consciousness had faded to black. The remaining six, as he was later told, were dealt by Cooper's fist while he lay lifeless on the hallway floor.

4.

You're responsible for him now.

The skunky singe of overroasted coffee beans pumped through the vents as if it were fresh air.

Sunday morning. They only roasted in the early hours of Sunday morning.

The smell was much more pungent when inhaled from the floor, and it stung Hannibal's nose just enough to bring him back into his body. His head was rock-heavy, weighted down by the injuries on his face. Even the small act of raising it strained his neck.

The apartment was dark. Not yet dawn. He'd been out cold for more than twelve hours.

Slowly, he pulled himself off the floor, bones marred by a metallic ache. He would suffer pain for the next week after the swelling went down. Palm tapping the open wound on his head, sticky from dried blood, Hannibal called out.

"Will?"

His voice echoed, reverberating off the space. He knew it would go unanswered, but a small part of him hoped that it would.

He stood fully, assessing his musculature to ensure nothing was broken. His ribs were bruised, pulled ligaments and joints, and then, of course, there were several lacerations on his face. Apart from those superficial wounds and what was undoubtedly a concussion, Cooper had succeeded in injuring little else.

A taser was a coward's weapon—the easy way out.

Hannibal slowly staggered down the hall to Will's room—empty. He checked the living room, dining room, and kitchen. He checked the fire escape, the roof, and lastly, his bedroom.

Will was gone.

The antique clock ticked—counting out his failure.

The air was still smudged with the smell of burning, invisible smoke. His bed—their bed—was still unmade, the sheets containing stains from the sex they had the previous morning. Beside it, Will's boxers were still lying on the floor.

Hannibal glanced at them, thinking vaguely of how he needed to avoid self-reflection to keep his mind clear.

He had to move quickly.

He went to the bathroom and turned on the faucet, washing the flaking blood from his face and hair, only looking in the mirror long enough to ensure he had adequately cleaned the gashes. His full reflection was far too abhorrent for him to contend with, looming like a shadow of regret.

The thought of Will made him move a little faster, the deep wounds on his face soon forgotten in his desperation to get out the door. He quickly discarded his bloodied clothes, changed into something clean, collected his things, and made his way to the foyer.

Just as his hand reached for the handle, it turned, and the door swung open.

Hannibal's soul dropped deep into his body, weight heavy like a cannonball, his skin evaporating as his bones broke from the sheer pressure of his heartbreak.

"Will."

There in the bleak morning, hidden under the translucent fabric of darkness, Will stood in front of Hannibal like a reflection far more devastating than of the bathroom mirror.

The young man's hair was dislodged and tangled, knotted together in clumps. His shoulders slumped forward with fatigue, barely quaking as if they were cold. He blinked in flinching flutters, desperate and meek, unable to make eye contact.

Hannibal brought this hand to cradle Will's chin, tenderly bringing Will's face to the light. The angular glow of the lights outside reflected vividly on a single tear, shimmering its way down Will's blue and black cheek.

The entire right side of Will's face was marked, bruised deeply beneath three significant cuts, the eyelid nearly swollen shut. His neck had three rings of red, finger-sized indents—the remnants of Cooper Kennedy's heinous hands.

"You should see the other guy," Will said, meagerly attempting to add humor to a morose situation.

Hannibal knew that Cooper was not unscathed. Will was not one to take such violence without reciprocity, but Hannibal also knew that Will could only take so much before he would have to surrender.

Unfortunately, Will's desire to stay with Hannibal superseded his self-preservation, and it broke Hannibal in half.

When a second tear fell, Hannibal brought his thumb up over the injured flesh and wiped away the stream.

"Is this why you couldn't tell me?" Hannibal asked, voice soft and encasing.

Will nodded meekly, trying to contain the flood that threatened to pour forward by blinking his eyes to dryness. Hannibal had no desire to coax further tears from the young man, only caressing the pain that sat like a steel knife. He drew Will in, tucking his head against his shoulder, and hugged him close.

5.

They showered together as the sun rose. Hannibal lathered Will's curls in cherry blossom shampoo, rinsing clean the tangles of dried blood. He washed the tarnished skin with a soft cloth impregnated with essential oils and soap, inspecting Will's body for other injuries as he did.

Cooper had been beating Will for some time. There were indentations beneath his forearms from unhealed pressure bruises and an extended vertical cut on his back that had just begun to scab—probably from being thrown against a wall corner or doorframe.

Will had hidden all of this—never uttered a word—all in dedication to them remaining together. Every game, every petulant argument, every temptation and tease had been pointing to this—a desperate cry for help.

After they showered and changed, Hannibal sutured the deepest gash on Will's face, and butterfly bandaged the others. He applied a frozen compress to the swollen area and offered Will pain medication that was politely refused.

They went to the kitchen, and Hannibal made a breakfast that Will didn't eat.

"How long has this been happening?" Hannibal asked, pouring Will another helping of coffee.

Will brought it to his lips, blowing gently across the top. "A while." He said, eyes staring out the window.

"Since the dinner party?"

When he pulled out a cigarette and lit it up, Hannibal refrained from attesting to the habit and did nothing but bring a small dish for him to use as an ashtray.

“Thank you,” Will said, tapping the edge. He took a moment to think back through all the times Cooper had hurt him. “He’s shoved me before that a few times.”

“In anger?”

Will exhaled. “Yeah.” He said, dropping back into his chair.

“When did it escalate?” Hannibal asked.

There was another moment of contemplation where Will’s eyes flitted across his memories, sharp like glinting knife points. “There was a night you weren’t here—off with Gus probably. “ He started. “Cooper brought up moving in with him. We fought, and it wasn’t pretty. I was tired of him, really, and I guess he saw your absence as the perfect opportunity.”

“Do you fight back?”

“Only when I have the energy,” Will laughed through his nose, but it was the most gut-wrenching thing Hannibal had ever heard Will say. “I know when it’s coming. Sometimes I can avoid it.”

“He believes these episodes to be disciplinary actions—something you deserve.”

Will nodded. “That’s why I didn’t tell you about the—him knowing about our criminal history.”

“You chose not to tell me to—“

“To avoid a beating.” Will interrupted, “Yeah.”

“How would he have known?” Hannibal inquired lightly. “I would never divulge to him the secrets we exchange.”

“Well,“ Will groaned, tapping ash from his cigarette and sitting back again. “You’re not the most predictable guy, Hannibal.” He said rather passively, “I didn’t know what you’d do.”

The posit brought silence behind it, engulfing everything like the burning smell from downstairs.

Hannibal and Will sat together inside a moment they had created out of their own impulsivity and foolishness. This was their life—a bundled mess of tangled and frayed wires they had rubbed together so often that nothing functioned properly.

They had self-isolated—but they were isolated together.

“Listen,” Will started, exhaling smoke and snuffing out his cigarette. “I know you want to do something about this right now, but we can’t.” He rested his elbows on the table, looking at

Hannibal through his damaged gaze, eyelids heavy. “Another opportunity has to present itself. We have to play the long game.”

Hannibal met his intention and agreed. He smiled and lightly collected Will’s fingers, pressing a kiss to the top. Given there was not much left for them to do right then, Hannibal moved away from the topic with a mild brush-off. “Did you sleep last night?” he asked.

“No,” Will uttered through a wide yawn, huffing out a soft sound at the end.

Hannibal laughed lightly. “You should sleep then.” He said, standing up to usher Will to the living room.

They sat down on the couch as fatigue wore thin the line between the waking and sleeping states, and, without question or pause, Will immediately dropped his head to Hannibal’s lap.

Hannibal tucked a pillow under his head and drew the throw blanket over the young man’s shoulders. He leaned down and gently pressed his lips into Will’s temple, hand combing through the soft curls. It took only moments for the young man’s body to slack in tension, releasing from consciousness, his breath and heartbeat elongating into a steady rhythm. After a minute or two, his eyes finally drooped closed, and Will drifted into sleep.

Hannibal sat there for countless hours.

It was easy enough.

In a near-comatose state, his mind was suspended above him, absent from his body. His eyes directed an unfocused gaze across the room, never really seeing beyond his concentration.

He thought back through the past year, every event and detail. He considered how each one connected to the next, generating a ‘how’ and ‘why’ for each one. The sequence of life became a formula, and after a while, theories and strategies started springing out of the analyzed data.

It was true.

Hannibal Lecter couldn’t kill Cooper Kennedy, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t make his life a living hell.

MIGRATION

1.

The average human body can consume up to 14mg of liquid concentrate LSD before toxicity levels reach lethal limits. Overdoses are rare, and even when administered in a non-clinical setting, any dose below 200mcg is considered medically safe.

For most, a daily dose of 5-10mcg offers improved mental function with few negative side effects. Somewhere around 25mcg, reality shifts past the synaptic capacity to handle, and the mind's consumption of its external environment shifts.

Will Graham started lacing Cooper Kennedy's morning smoothie with 30mcg of LSD, adding the extra 5mcg just because he wanted to.

One time in a moment of vengeful anger, he had tipped the entire amber bottle into the green pulpy liquid, but thought better of it and threw it out.

We have to play the long game, he reminded himself.

This was no longer just about fear, death, separation, or murder.

This was about the suffering—the slow and agonizing slaughter.

Will Graham wanted Cooper Kennedy to suffer.

To him, these small knife twists in the form of 30mcg were the buildup, and whether he was completely aware of it or not, Will wanted to experience each sensation the maliciousness brought. It was important to him to watch Cooper's plight, and because it was important to Will, it was also important to Hannibal.

While it had been vague, Hannibal had constructed a plan for this, and Will—while still understanding all the events that preceded such an emotion—was surprised by his own delight.

Cooper Kennedy would be boiled inside his own bath water, Will hands washing the man's skin as it solidified into something consumable, digested, providing sustenance and strength before he was expelled and left behind forever.

The Kennedy world was built on bedrock, unshakeable high inside the ivory tower. Changing that was impossible. But as any average human with a penchant for self-help mantras would say:

"When you can't change reality, change your perspective instead."

Will and Hannibal were anything if not enthusiastic about outside the box thinking. If Cooper's world could not be cracked open, they would shift his mental stability and crack open his skull instead.

So, it started with the drugs.

LSD cocktail in the morning, barbiturates at night, and a speckling of Propofol, ACE Inhibitors, and hypnotics to keep Cooper docile should he attempt another violent outburst.

That night, Will cracked the premixed capsule and dumped the lulling powder into Cooper's nightly Old Fashioned, peering once over his shoulder as he stirred it, unassumingly, with the cocktail spoon. With a sense of accomplished glee, he plucked a candy-red cherry from the jar, plopped it into the glass, and garnished with a slice of orange.

One less night to worry about, all his malevolent secrets contained within the aromatic brown fluid.

He took the glass and walked it over to Cooper where he laid, long legs and arms sprawled across the black leather couch, deep voice chuckling way too loudly at his reality television show. Without looking up, he extended his hand up, cradling the glass as Will handed it over.

"Thanks babe," he said just before slurping a sip from the rim.

Will went to sit in the armchair but Cooper slapped the seat above his head–also without looking up–and Will checked his watch, then tucked his leg and sat down. A large hand reached back to brush Will's arm, lightly combing his dark arm hair, and rather automatically, Will threaded his fingers through Cooper's now short hair.

It was funny to Will in that moment how close deranged and normal could sit, how one could feel so much like the other.

For a minute, and perhaps for the minutes that followed, Will fell into a state of forget when everything was simply how it had been for the past year and a half. Often enough, he would have a thought–that to him lasted no longer than blink–that maybe his situation wasn't so bad, that no change or plan was needed, and he could continue an uninterrupted life with Cooper, sleeping with Hannibal on the side.

Sometimes it was easier to believe, and because it was easier, it made it enticing.

Those acknowledgements, the understanding of his weakness that developed only because he was persuaded—by the hands that now touched him—to think that this life, here on the Upper East Side in a penthouse apartment, poisoned lawyer draped across his lap, watching reruns of forced reality, was the easiest and happiest life Will Graham would ever have.

No matter how present in this new life, Will could honestly admit to himself that some small part of him believed the lie. It was all he knew, and it was uncanny how familiarity and comfort felt the same.

Cooper took another large sip of his drink, then spoke, “Hey, don’t forget we have that *thing* this weekend.”

Will furrowed his brow as he stared into the shifting colors of the television, watching his thoughts more than the screen. “What *thing?*” he asked, shuffling through the various upcoming events on the Kennedy Social Calendar. “The Lichtman thing?”

“Oh god no,” Cooper said with a haughty chuckle. “That *is* this weekend, but we don’t attend that type of thing,” he finished, continuing his verbal transformation of the couple into one singular amorphous blob that catered only to Cooper’s ever growing roster of Likes and Dislikes.

Will, however, clenched his jaw out of anticipated pleasure, like the seconds before sinking into a hot bath, then refuted Cooper’s condescension. “What *type of thing* don't we attend?”

“Lichtman’s a great guy, but he throws that annual party for all his seedy friends. We’d have a good time but it attracts the wrong kind of people.”

“Guilty people, you mean?” Will sighed.

“Please don’t start,” Cooper said, upturning his glass and setting it on the floor beside him, intentionally avoiding affection by returning his hand to his chest instead of Will’s arm. “I don’t have the energy for you tonight.”

Will contained another sigh, flicking his watch face toward him and checking the time.

20 minutes at most.

These quarrels that consisted of less than a dozen sentences were always the abrupt adjustment that corrected Will’s standards for normality.

They brought clarity.

Will had been staying on the Upper East Side more nights a week than he ever imagined he would in an attempt to regain access to Cooper’s trust. Both he and Hannibal adamantly denied their affair, and when–after a very long conversation behind the closed door of Hannibal’s bedroom, Gustav called Cooper to say he had been lying because he was jealous —Cooper had started to ease up on his white-knuckled hold.

They were awful nights. Not fraught with violence or loud arguments, but lonely and consuming

At the penthouse, there were no late-night runs down to the liquor mart for a bottle of Will’s old standard, no stillness accompanied by the hum of a fan, no fragrant wafts of roasting coffee beans, and—most importantly of all—no room at the end of the hall containing Hannibal Lecter.

Here, everything was sharp, loud, always fused with the near constant sound of the television. When Will needed something, he would run to the grocery store only to have Cooper ask him

why he didn't use the delivery service, then make some comment about how it didn't seem like Will was really trying to adopt Cooper's life as his own.

Every line of pleading apology Will uttered through seductive and innocent lips covered every line of true thought that admitted, *'It seems like I'm not trying because I'm not trying.'*

That apartment lived in two states and two states only–teenage boy and pristine clean. Every Tuesday and Thursday the maid service came, and somehow, in the very short period between those two rotating days, Cooper could turn a mausoleum into a landfill. Apart from these scheduled cleanings, Will and Cooper had no routines, no habits, no morning coffee brewing or sourdough and sausage toast, or cigarettes out on the fire escape—nothing to settle into and offer peace.

Everything Will loved about the apartment in Williamsburg sat in stark contrast to the space he now occupied.

While he was aware that he may not understand the fundamentals of his own identity—the fabric of who he was still an ever growing tapestry–Will did know that whoever he was found full acceptance at Berry & N 8th Street with Hannibal at his side.

Here, he had to put on a face and become someone else entirely.

That, however, would change in...15 minutes and counting.

Cooper was already starting to yawn. Will peered down unassumingly to watch the blinks of the large man's dark eyelashes slow in pace.

Perhaps he was easier to tranquilize than Will had previously anticipated. Hannibal was nothing if not clever, probably calculating the man's metabolism and increasing the dose to offset Cooper's size. Whatever the case, it was working like a charm.

Five more minutes and Cooper's body had released tension completely, jaw dropping open to emit his usual, heinous snore.

Will stood up, pulled his phone from his pocket, tapped five times, then made his way to the front door.

It was a sequence Will learned over time.

Wait for the door call.
0571
Silver button to alert the front desk.
0571
Black button to send down the elevator.
0571
Unlock the front door.

Will grabbed the brass knob and yanked with dynamic force, the suctioned air dislodging a solitary curl.

He grinned wide. “Good evening, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal reflected the smile with matched enthusiasm. “Hello, Will.”

Egotistically secure–as he always was–in his dosing capabilities, Hannibal didn’t even glance in the lifeless Cooper’s direction before striding inside and scooping Will up, collecting his lips and pressing with desperation. Will frantically clutched him back, taking in what small gasps of air he could between the moist exchange, not caring if he suffocated right then because he had missed that infuriating, complicated, beautiful man so much he could hardly stand it.

“Hannibal,” he said, unable to contain his need to speak his name as he floated inside the sturdy, containing arms.

Hannibal hoisted him up and walked him to the back of the couch, allowing them to rest as close as they could to each other, retracting from the kiss but allowing Will to sweetly suck at his neck while he asked his questions.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah—I’m—fine.”

“He didn’t touch you?”

“Nope.”

“How quickly did the drugs take effect?”

Will brought his watch to his sightline, continuing his soft presses to Hannibal’s amber-scented neck, interrupting only to say, “Fifteen—ish.”

“You really should be more specific, Will,” Hannibal said, eyelids heavy, a smile bearing his sharp teeth.

“I’m busy, Doctor,” Will replied, hand searching over tweed slacks to find Hannibal’s hard cock.

“As much as I enjoy your enthusiasm, my darling, we have other tasks at hand.”

Will reeled back, not quite angry but not quite pleased.

“Shall we get to work?” Hannibal asked, dismissing the look.

“Yeah,” Will conceded with a smirk. “I’m ready to get out of here.”

Hannibal stepped back as they both adjusted themselves and coughed, then, as if nothing had happened at all, the Silver Haired Fox opened his arm and ushered Will ahead.

“After you.”

Hannibal followed Will into the apartment, down the large hallway observing the poorly picked modern art, frameless glass windows and seamless mahogany and slate floors—a space marketed to upwardly mobile middle-aged men who all seemed to share the same fantasy of ejaculating on every surface without ever staining it.

How unrecognizable Hannibal found it all as he gazed into the reflective surfaces searching for a familiar mirrored image, only to find he did not exist in that space, even as a facsimile.

Hannibal Lecter and Cooper Kennedy both shared in the unique experience of wealth, surely accompanied by a past littered with less than admirable role models, giving them the aptitude to choose the more exquisite things in life, enjoy and experience the luxuries class and status had to offer. They both found themselves beguiled by a man with little to no experience in any of these facets, and both coveted him as if he were more valuable than all the riches they had combined.

The difference that separated Hannibal so profoundly from Cooper was not morality or behavior, or in its own right, even love. Hannibal could not reasonably claim that what Mr. Kennedy felt for Will wasn't love, or love by a measure which he had been raised to know. He could not reasonably compare any action of his to Mr. Kennedy's and by any justifiable standard, bring them to even the dimmest description of righteousness.

In the brief walk through that apartment, Hannibal identified the key component that gave him credence to continue as he was, unabated by morality or ethics. He was better than Cooper Kennedy for one reason only:

Will had chosen Hannibal instead of choosing Cooper.

Hannibal only wanted Will's love and devotion if it was freely given. Cooper Kennedy had no such values. So in return, as a token of Hannibal's possessive hatred, in an act of reciprocity, he would take everything from Cooper Kennedy without his willing consent.

The first step was to determine the limits of his reach.

Will walked them down the hall and into the study, behind the gaudy desk adorned with a green ledger lamp, and gestured to the bottom shelf of a bookcase where—under a collection of first edition law books—a small safe sat.

"Chances are it's somewhere else, but I figure…"

"…best to try the most obvious first," Hannibal agreed, finishing the thought. He dropped a tool satchel on Cooper's oversized desk, removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves.

It was admittedly a long shot, since Cooper Kennedy was nothing if not thorough and would surely not leave something so valuable to the protection of a blatantly displayed safe inside his home office. However, the exact opposite was indeed true.

Hannibal worked approximately half an hour before he had successfully hacked the safe's multifaceted, digitally encrypted lock. He clicked the latch, gave a boastful glance back

toward Will, then pulled out a blue marbled file folder stuffed to the binding with papers, tacked together with two gold paperclips.

Hannibal stood and brought it to the desk where Will sat down and immediately started sifting through it. Supportive and protective, Hannibal stood over him, offering only a steady hand across his shoulder as he looked on.

“Yeah,” Will said, needing less than two pages to know. “This is it.” He quickly disassembled the various stacks and laid them in order across the desk, each one tenderly taken by Hannibal for assessment.

And to his great displeasure, it was everything Cooper Kennedy had promised.

The semi-legal plan that served as the cage Cooper constructed around Will’s continued loyalty was two fold.

First was a chain reaction set off by the coroner's office when the phone call was made regarding Cooper's death. From there, a network of connections would contact an unknown person, of unknown influence, to send an unknown person, of unknown location, to pick up one of the two men. Which one was unknown.

This meant that Will and Hannibal had no way of knowing how much time or space they’d have for escape should they choose to kill Cooper.

Second was the legal process of apprehending the one that wasn’t chosen by the hit man, which would be easier to do without the benefit of a partner.

It apparently didn’t seem to matter to Cooper who lived and who died, just so long as one remained to endure the suffering of the other’s loss.

“He thinks you’re in love with me,” Hannibal surmised, “or that we are in love with each other.”

“What?” Will asked, turning back in the chair to try and find where the hell this document said that.

“He assumes we would suffer equally in the terminal absence of the other, and that is to say, suffer greatly.”

“You can suffer someone’s death and not be in love with them, Hannibal,” Will said flatly, turning back around to brush off whatever Hannibal was getting at.

“Do you believe Cooper reflects that sentiment?”

“I don’t know if he does or he doesn’t, that doesn’t really matter right now.”

“You’re being dismissive, Will. It matters a great deal. Should Cooper believe the opposite is true, that we do not love each other, he may suspect that his plan is flawed.”

“If we don’t value each other it doesn't really matter if the other one is dead,” Will concluded, arriving at the same hypothesis.

“Precisely.”

Will’s brow turned, inquisitive as his thoughts followed the line of logic. “What good would that do us?”

“Seeds of doubt serve as distractions,” Hannibal replied, gently tapping the edges of his papers against the desk.

“What are we trying to distract him from?”

Hannibal’s lips pinned his cheek into knowing half smile, clearly hoping that Will would ask such a question. “I’d like to take you somewhere,” he said.

“You want to go somewhere now?” Will asked, knowing how late it was getting.

“Yes.”

Of course Hannibal had to put on a show.

Will rolled his eyes, annoyed that the man couldn’t put away the dramatics even for one night. “Hannibal, you can just tell me,” he said.

But—in typical ego-inflating fashion—Hannibal didn’t listen. “Ensure you have what you need before we leave,” he asserted as he returned the file back to the safe in the exact position it was retrieved from.

“Everything I need is back at the apartment,” Will said, standing from the desk.

“Splendid. We’ll leave right away.”

2.

Corpses. Carcasses. Cut in quarters. All in pieces. Warm and fresh. Cold and frozen. Floors cleaned. Sanitizing spray wash. Left in peace like an office.

The words appeared in Will’s head long before they walked inside the building that sat in a dirty corner between Chelsea and Hell’s kitchen. While the thoughts may have caught him off guard at any other time, they did not that night.

The voices were no longer outside him. Like splinters inside his brain matter, their sharp pain covered in a film, all belonging to him, each one now spoke in his identical tone and timbre.

They were his thoughts. They were his reality.

After riding up the service elevator and walking down an empty corridor, Hannibal unlocked a triple bolted dark metal door and allowed Will to enter first.

It should have made him uneasy, the intensity of it all. The flickering blue light reflecting against stainless steel, onyx iron, and deep red, refracting shades of purple, pink, and orange into the dark night.

Will didn't have to enter a space like that to understand the monstrous indifference that sat inside the foundations of Hannibal, as cold as the gray cinder block walls. The only thing he did here was slice with the coolness of a surgeon. The viscous energy, the thin, sharp air in which smells were suspended, the cherry red floor surely hiding blood stains, slick enough to allow easy streams into large drains, it was all the same to Hannibal—a haven.

Through the transformative years that preceded their life in New York, cutting, slicing, processing, dissecting flesh and bone until life breath left every cell was nothing more than a conceptualization to Will, vividly stuck behind his eyelids. Any potential slaughter felt like a near automated task done with the precision of another's hands.

Hannibal's process was one of passion—both contained and calculated. He handled his blades with chilling detachment.

But no one apart from Will knew the thoughts and feelings that steadied those killer hands.

Hannibal had brought Will here for a purpose and despite the way he knew with certainty that he was not another source that would soon fill the walk-in freezer, Will understood that some part of Hannibal wished to keep him here forever.

Previously, Hannibal never had anyone to share this space with, and now he was sharing it with Will.

The cutting room floor.

Will walked along the wall, finger grazing the textured concrete, looking up at the chains and hooks hanging from the ceiling, glistening—as inviting as holiday decorations. He didn't need courage to find Hannibal's maroon eyes that followed his movements with anticipation, gleaming like a sacred metal all their own.

"What do you do here, Hannibal?" Will asked, his voice echoing over the stark surfaces accompanied by a dull siren wailing from the streets below.

The answer to that question was tacitly understood, but this was a reveal, and Will wanted to hear Hannibal speak from inside his deepest, darkest room.

Voice low and booming, terrifying in the most reassuring way, Hannibal spoke. "Would you like me to show you, Will?"

"Yes."

Will watched intently while Hannibal showed him every feature of that operating room, every tool and process, ending at the freezer that contained the final product, each motion fluid—

like a dance.

Hannibal truly had an arresting beauty about him. It was almost disturbing to know that something brutally vulnerable sat beneath the sophisticated aura he worked so hard to project. Something Will once resented changed into something he appreciated, an admiration to the artificial indifference, accompanied by an egotism that it was him and him alone that had the ability to break it.

“Together, we can cut through The Kennedys world,” Hannibal concluded, the words like the ending punctuation on his poetic display.

Person by person, body by body, slice by slice, Will now had the capacity to dismantle the cage around him, all in thanks to the man he had chosen, a vile protector finally proving his infinite devotion.

Will brought his body to Hannibal who leaned against the large metal table at the center of the room. He could not at that moment conceive the words it would take to explain his feelings, so when tried to express himself, the only thing he managed was simple and sincere, spoken with hot breath into Hannibal’s open mouth.

“I want you, Hannibal. I want this.”

He desperately pulled at Hannibal’s neck, kissing him with a fever that spiked high in his heart. Hannibal embraced him, encompassed him, turned and pushed him onto the same table that was usually covered in entrails, as clean as an operating table.

The soft yearning grunts that slipped between their shared mouths, the traffic on the street, the music from the corner bar, the thumping and clanking of their bodies moving together, separating only long enough to undress, all faded to near silence outside some uniformity—a salacious and malevolent nexus.

Will sat to straddle Hannibal’s hips below him, bare knees pushing painfully against the unforgiving steel while he slid down onto Hannibal’s hard cock, held steady at his entrance.

Every part of him opened, every part of him filled, and suddenly Will’s chest itched so terribly that the pressure pulsed inside his ears.

He scratched and scratched, fingers desperately digging into his shirt, trying to reach the source. One scratch too many and it no longer grated, the space between the fabric and his skin suddenly sticking when he rubbed.

Will quickly stopped, unbuttoned his shirt and looked down.

Both men stopped immediately, the discovery like a revelation.

Will’s sternum had turned into an abraded circle of crimson, the flesh weeping in beads of blood, one falling down the sinewed abdomen.

Hannibal did not hesitate. As if he understood the true nature of the injury, he brought his face to Will’s belly and licked upward, consuming the small trickle then kissing the center of

the wound.

And it felt so fucking good, Hannibal's face pressing into the broken flesh, stinging as much as it satiated the itch.

He cared for Will's bleeding heart—the beautiful thing contained inside the skin, making him unbearably miserable day after day with little to no ease—was suddenly free from the confines of Will's rib cage, allowed to weep into Hannibal's receptive body.

Will felt the sting dissipate, the itch moisten into a burn, and it was pure, unadulterated relief.

"*Ahfuck*, Hannibal!" he yelled, head lolling backward and forward, watching the beautiful man below him coat his mouth and jaw in shimmering crimson. "Don't stop!"

Hannibal didn't let up as Will continued to bounce slowly, fistfuls of silver hair, pressing the caressing lips tighter to his sternum, relishing every lick and nibble as if Hannibal were feasting on every painful part of him, swallowing it away and opening him up to freedom.

Will took hold of the hooks hanging from above, raised his face and released a brutally dark moan as he came hard between their bodies.

It didn't matter who he was in Chelsea, in New York, in Baltimore, in Virginia, in this country or the next.

Will belonged here, the beast in him and around him, heart bleeding profusely, every drop cared for, open yet complete, vulnerable yet strong, laid bare but protected, wholly his own yet completely surrendered, the two dualities existing as one, Hannibal and Will, unified inside that room on the killing floor.

3.

After they locked up and left, they walked for nearly two blocks before the sky opened up and a spritzing rain started to fall. Both men tucked into their coats, collars lifted high, and increased their pace.

They'd have to walk another five blocks before they saw another yellow taxi but the subway entrance was up on the opposite street corner. Will took hold of Hannibal's elbow, coaxing him to cross the street.

"Let's just take the subway, Hannibal," Will said.

Hannibal stalled for only a moment before Will stopped, looking back with a light smile of understanding, softly convincing the older man with a tender, gesturing nod.

“Come on. Ride the train with me.”

Down the trash speckled stairs, avoiding the handrail at all cost, they descended to the world below, a landscape of tile and concrete, stench hanging in the humidity, wafts of forced air like an electric screeching wind.

They went through the turnstile and made it to the platform just as their train arrived. Inside, a woman falling asleep, a man leaned against a standing handrail, a handful of scattered occupants littered behind the seats Will and Hannibal chose.

The carriage lurched and picked up speed until the passing tunnels were nothing more than steady, repetitive thuds, the smeared plastic windows alternating between light and dark, reducing the passengers around them to nothing more than flickers.

Damp clothes clinging to their hot bodies inside the dense cabin air, Hannibal draped his arm behind Will.

Not knowing what compelled him, Will found Hannibal’s mouth and applied soft presses, the delicate smacks of their lips inaudible under the loud whirring noise. He grazed his nose along Hannibal’s jaw, the corners of his mouth unable to contain his smile as they nuzzled each other like those teenage boys inside that silly foreign film, an image they witnessed so long ago suddenly coming to fruition.

Something changed inside Will that night. Like passengers on a carnival ride, the moment filled with exhilaration, delighted passion, an intimacy only they shared even when surrounded by people.

Though the raw skin was still sensitive, the noisome itch beneath Will’s sternum had dissipated as though something had hatched out of him. For a brief moment, he wondered if his entire heart was exposed for how powerfully it ached with unmitigated joy.

They would look back at that ride and recall it as *A Nostalgic First*, a memory that marked the remainder of their lives.

Will took thumb and forefinger, holding Hannibal’s chin between them as he reeled back enough to gaze into Hannibal’s eyes, maroon meeting cobalt, and with a face more sincere than Hannibal could ever recall witnessing, Will whispered,

“I love you, Hannibal.”

Face soft, softer than Will could ever recall witnessing, Hannibal offered him a gentle kiss then rested his forehead against Will’s, fervently reciprocating,

“I love you, Will.”

All of the memories from this time period would eventually be filed in that cabinet labeled *What The Fuck Was That: Do Not Open* but Will knew right then that this moment—tethered by dark and brutal love, forehead resting together in soft gentility, riding a train heading

toward destruction—would be a memory Will regularly revisited, opening the cabinet of horrific experiences to take out this perfect one.

Will Graham intrinsically understood that this moment was worth all the trauma in the world.

DECOY

1.

Will was doing really well until the nausea hit.

He had listened to every conversation, said all the right things, answered every question with charm, and even asked a few of his own. The tenor of his voice had shifted for the occasion, and he was vaguely aware of how strange and outrageous it felt—like wearing a clown suit. It sounded great to everyone else, but it was a ridiculous lie.

“Don’t forget we have that thing this weekend.”

"What thing?"

That Thing was The Annual Kennedy Christmas Celebration, hosted by Dean and Carol Kennedy—Cooper's parents.

It was the self-proclaimed Social Event of the Season held at the family’s weekend villa in Westchester—a Classic Tudor mansion in which vast elegant room linked to vast elegant room.

It wasn't a small party, by anyone's standard. A steady stream of cars had flowed through the cobblestone courtyard, requiring two valets to manage. Guests had filtered through the front doors in droves.

That's why Will and Cooper arrived early.

It was a great idea until Cooper insisted on giving Will a tour of the house, accompanied by running commentary on The Kennedy Family Legacy.

Patiently bored to tears, Will followed Cooper from one room to the next, only half listening, admiring decor that ranged from delicate family heirlooms under glass displays to a prized stuffed pheasant mounted above a shotgun—its black beady eyes perpetually unaware of the irony.

The tour ended in the library, which was a nice reprieve. Out of all the rooms, that was Will's favorite. It reminded him of the bookstore back in Brooklyn, the smell of paper and ink eliciting the memory.

He took his time pacing the wall-to-wall bookshelves, hands resting inside his pockets. As his eyes scrolled across each thick spine, reading titles in silent judgment, he kept every sarcastic laugh and disgusted eye roll to himself.

It wasn't that they were laughable choices or poor selections. As a matter of fact, most were rare works from history's best authors. The average person might walk into that room and associate such a collection with spiritual depth or philosophical intelligence.

But Will knew better.

He was confident that the Kennedys had never even opened most of those books.

The implied perception, the way it made them look, was the only reason the Kennedys kept a room like that.

A beautiful allusion.

That room deserved different owners, people who would appreciate all it had to offer, including a rather large item Will discovered when he made it to the back garden window. He had missed it initially, which was strange, considering its size.

A beam rose across his face the second his eyes met the black and gold Zuckerman harpsichord, unable to contain his affectionate half-smile.

What are the odds? He thought.

He withdrew a hand from his pocket and let his finger fall to a single cream-colored key. The sharp, immediate note erupted into the room, and for a brief moment, it felt like Hannibal was there. The sound filled Will's heart just as much as it filled the room.

“That piece was a gift for Carol,” someone said from the doorway.

Yanked away from his momentary ease, Will snapped his head toward the source.

If the similar features didn't give him away, then the mention of Carol did. Clearly, this was the great and powerful Kennedy patriarch, but for some reason, the way this guy commanded his voice into the room made him seem insecure and untrustworthy. He strode toward Will, each heavy footstep echoing across the ceiling. “I gave it to her for our 20th wedding anniversary. Custom made and shipped from Germany.”

“Do you play?” Will asked.

“No, no,” he replied with a laugh, “and don’t tell her I said so, but Carol doesn't either. Do you?”

“No—but I know a guy who does.”

“A rarity.”

Will nodded with the same sweet half-smile, peering down at the instrument. “Yes, it is.”

“You must be Will,” Mr. Patriarch said, offering Will a firm, tugging handshake. “Dean Kennedy.”

Andrew Dean Kennedy.

Dean Kennedy was a tall man, only an inch or two shorter than his son. Unlike Cooper, he had an irregular physique that did not fill the sleek lines of a suit the way his son's did. If Cooper was the masterpiece, Dean was the prototype. However, he did have a full head of silver hair, proving that Cooper Kennedy would have a full head of hair until the day he died.

"It's a pleasure, Mr. Kennedy," Will said, returning the grip.

“Pleasure's mine, and please, call me Dean," he offered as a superficial gesture. "Cooper's told us so much about you.”

“Oh, Coop likes to exaggerate," Will replied with all the witty charm he could muster. "Truth is, I’m not nearly as nice as he says.”

“Ah-ha, Coop!" Dean laughed, looking over at his son with an approving smile. He dropped a hand to Will's shoulder with slightly too much force because Dean Kennedy thought that gentility was a feminine trait, and the reserved and specific touch clearly said, *you might be gay, but we’re still men here*. "I like this one, Cooper. He doesn’t pull any punches."

“Don’t I know it,” Cooper agreed, greeting his father with a firm handshake. “There’s never a dull moment with him.”

The two men shared a rather awkward, back-slapping hug.

It was interesting, though—the exchange that followed, how Cooper withdrew. He straightened his posture like a soldier standing at attention, and whether he knew it or not, Cooper looked intimidated, almost meek. It was as if he had transformed into a child nervously awaiting his father’s approval.

And truthfully, Cooper had every reason to be nervous.

Dean Kennedy was a savvy businessman who only invested in value. Time and energy meant dollars and cents. He couldn't afford to waste something as expensive as love on less than deserving stock. Dean only offered his affection after passing judgment—a routine assessment. He had to ensure that his son still met the requirements of value.

Will knew that Dean Kennedy could withdraw love like withdrawing money from a bank. Although the uncertainty lasted no longer than an inhale, it was still frightening, riddled with anxiety.

In an instant, Will realized that the only thing Cooper Kennedy feared was the loss of his father's approval.

“It’s good to see you, son,” Dean said at last, and those must have been magic words because Cooper’s stone muscles finally loosened. Dean clapped him on the shoulder and squeezed it —a quiet congratulations for passing the test. “Come on. Let’s get a drink.”

They went to the study—which served as the men's secret waiting room for the party to come—and conversed through puffs of cigar smoke and sips of Glenn McKenna.

“So, Will," Dean started. "Cooper says you used to do some fishing. I’m a bit of an angler myself.”

He told Will he was an outdoorsman, a *mighty fine* outdoorsman *if he did say so himself.*

Will didn't even bother sharing his previous experiences because he knew they didn't matter.

Any accomplishment, impressive or otherwise, only served to prop up Dean's next anecdote. Will could have had Bigfoot's head mounted on his wall, and still, Dean Kennedy would belittle it right before relaying a story of his similar yet more impressive success.

Those men—those men were the type of men you pacify.

So, Will let him talk, laughing here and there, awe-struck in all the right places, allowing him to win with every word. He agreed with everything Dean said, and within the hour, the old man admitted, rather loudly to the group, “I like this guy!” with an arm slung over Will’s shoulder.

That's all it took.

After the short bonding session ended, Dean told Cooper, “We should get out to the party. Your mother will want to do her routine nagging and bragging.”

That's when the quiet faded away, replaced by overlapping voices and clinking glasses, the fused noises hanging in the air like humidity.

Cooper's mother stood at the edge of the parlor, surveying the crowd, an elbow tucked into her folded arm. Her bobbed red hair sat flat against her cheeks, fingers, wrists, and neck, adorned with a mixture of pearls and diamonds that only accented the modest elegance of her black A-line dress.

Cooper greeted her first, leaning down to kiss her once on each cheek.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she said quickly. “Donna Winter brought her journalist boyfriend—the one from the Times—and your Uncle Patrick is still fuming about that article they ran about you. You’ll have to settle him, or tonight will be a disaster.”

Carol Ivette Kennedy.

Everyone knew Carol Kennedy, even if they had never met her. Carol Kennedy was a personality type that pervaded every culture and social class but thrived inside this world where her association with wealth gave her just enough power to artificially inflate her narcissism.

"I'll handle it in a minute," Cooper replied, rubbing her arm. "First, I'd like you to meet Will."

When Will shook her hand, she offered her four fingers as if they were fragile, worried they might break off if someone squeezed too hard. The smile she forcefully pressed against the outside of her face offered very little warmth. It lacked the added vitality of her husband's disposition that a well-maintained plethora of vices afforded him.

This woman had not known happiness in a very long time.

She had no such outlet. Her vice was manipulation.

Dressed in etiquette and politeness, always excused with caring concern, it was the only power she had, and she used it as frequently as possible. An expert at the game, Carol Kennedy always got her way.

Despite all her negative attributes, Will couldn't help but feel sorry for her. He witnessed her like an image of what he would become should he remain inside this world—a shell hollowed out by the greedy hands of the Kennedy men.

"We're so glad you're here, Will," Carol said, giving Will's arm a light brush. "I keep telling Cooper that it's high time you met the family. He's never been this serious about a boyfriend before."

She meant it as a compliment to Will, which was why Will tried to deflect it.

"Serious, huh?" Will said behind a coy smile and looked up at Cooper. "We took our time, I guess," he mused, politely trying articulate that it wasn't all that serious. "It's still a day-by-day thing."

Carol's smile suddenly became sly, widening like a Cheshire cat. "Oh, yes. Yes, of course. It's just a casual fling," she said, eyes darting to Cooper with a wink, clutching his forearm before she walked off.

"What the hell does that mean?" Will tersely whispered under his breath.

"That's my mother for you," Cooper replied, smiling as he brushed past the topic. "Don't overthink it, babe. It means she likes you."

An endless stream of introductions followed: old family friends, distant relatives, lawyers, financial advisors, old co-workers, current co-workers, golfing buddy after golfing buddy, and one woman that Will felt certain was Dean's mistress.

They were all important—each name memorized and tucked away for later—but they were also disposable, fake, a forced reality playing on a screen.

The Kennedy world was one of unhappiness, every crack stuffed with temporary patches that eventually dissolved, only to leave even larger holes behind. It was an unending cycle that deteriorated authenticity until no substance was left.

One of the most frequently used fillers was alcohol.

They drank it like water.

At first, Will thought maybe it was to blame for his upset stomach. Of course, it could have also been the overtly lavish dinner. Or the slight claustrophobia from the overcrowded room. Or the lack of air, sucked away by constant conversation. He tried to pinpoint the source but couldn't, which was both weird and annoying.

He glanced down at his watch.

9:00 PM.

Blowing a sigh through his lower lip, he blinked hard and shook out his shoulders.

It would, of course, be another three hours before they could leave. Sick or not, there was no escaping this event. Cooper was adamant. He clutched his glass, focusing on the cool condensation beneath his palms. Occupying his mind was the feasible solution, and, for a while, he distracted himself, blaming the excessive socializing for his discomfort.

Will was mid-conversation when he felt a prickle of gooseflesh, a chill wracking his body in a shutter.

It was instantaneous—a lightning bolt epiphany.

Will suddenly knew.

He knew he wasn't sick from the booze. He knew something else was happening. He knew his body was responding to danger. He knew that the voices from his apartment were with him, around him, hidden amongst the crowd. He knew they were trying to say something to him, but he couldn’t hear them over the noise.

What warnings were they whispering?

Panicked, Will counted the exits.

The entrance was the farthest away and would take the longest to reach. The back door and the garage were through the kitchen, but Cooper and Dean were speaking just outside the doorway. The terrace was toward the back of the parlor. It would take less than a dozen steps to reach but would require a great deal of polite crowd dodging to slip through unseen. Still, it seemed the safest option.

He swallowed the rest of his drink, set his glass on the nearest surface, and made it nearly three steps before a large hand firmly grabbed his elbow.

He turned around, knowing it was Cooper, but for a second, he didn't recognize the face.

It was smiling affectionately—happy almost.

“Hey,” Cooper said sweetly, his sage and sunshine eyes sparkling. “Don’t go anywhere just yet.”

Will's brow twisted in confusion. He almost didn’t understand the words. They weren’t a demand at all. They were an ask-—a genuine, hopeful request, and the hold on Will's elbow

softened to a caress.

What was this?

A high-pitched repetitive ring drew his attention away. Will's head swiveled toward the sound, finding Dean standing at the head of the room, clinking a champagne flute with a fork.

As the crowd shifted their focus, there was a sliver of silence between their hushing murmurs and Dean's first words, inside which Will's ghostly specters became real, four people standing around him, speaking a single word of warning:

Don't.

Don't? Don't what?

Then, like an apparition, Will felt Cooper's body step close behind him, nearly startling him when his giant hand lightly brushed Will's back, and his lips gently kissed Will's temple.

"You alright?" he whispered into Will's ear.

Will blinked hard a few times. He couldn't remember the last time Cooper asked him if he was alright. Had Cooper seen his discomfort and come over to check on him? Why would he do that? What kind of game was this? When was the ax going to fall?

"Yeah, I'm fine," he whispered in response, planting his feet and inhaling slowly, using every ounce of strength to reassert physical control over his body.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dean's loud voice echoed. He started his speech with a convivial smile, its warmth supplied by the drink in hand. "Not so ladies and little less than gentlemen," he added in jest, loosening up the audience.

Everyone chuckled, and Will wanted to vomit.

"Thank you all for coming tonight. Carol and I are so grateful that you continue to show up, year after year, *even when you aren't invited."*

Everyone laughed again, and Will was too distracted to offer fake amusement.

"This party has been a long-running tradition in the Kennedy household. We've done this for... what," he asked, turning to Carol, "since Cooper was little, right? I know that's hard to imagine—a time when Coop wasn't 9 feet tall. Granted, it was a *very* long time ago."

Everyone giggled when Cooper hung his head in feigned embarrassment. Will looked up at him, and the man was still smiling.

"Sorry, my boy. Age is just a number," Dean lovingly joked, and for whatever reason, Cooper tucked Will into his body and resting his chin on Will's head.

“This gathering is a Kennedy tradition—one that Carol and I always hoped we would pass on to our son so he can pass it on to his son, and in that way, perhaps it would live forever, much like the Kennedy name.”

Everyone settled as they heard the tone shift into sincerity.

“Coop. Come on up!” Dean beckoned, waving him up. Cooper released Will, and the crowd whistled and clapped as he went to his father's side.

“We couldn’t be more proud of you, son. You've built a legacy for yourself, one that lives up to the Kennedy name, one that you'll someday pass on to your son. We're so thrilled you finally found someone to share in your successes and support you in your downfalls," Dean raised his glass toward Will. “Will, we’re delighted to have you.”

Will tried not to furrow his brow and nodded a confused and embarrassed thanks, knowing that Dean's words might be sincere, but to Will, they were meaningless.

Cooper and Dean embraced then Dean stepped away to stand with his wife.

“*Thank you*, everyone,” Cooper said, taking center stage, his powerful, structured voice always so convincing. “Mom. Pop. I don’t take this responsibility lightly. I know through the years you’ve worried about me, worried where—*or who*—I would end up with,” he teasingly admitted.

Everyone laughed at the shared inside joke of Cooper’s checkered dating history.

“*But uh*—when the time is right, the time is right, and it can’t be right before that," he stated clearly.

Everyone harmoniously hummed in sympathetic understanding, and the moment became severe again.

Cooper's dandelion irises collected Will's icy blue eye contact, and the second they did, Cooper's face broke into a smile that Will hadn't seen in a very long time. It was just as genuine as the one witnessed across that flower stand over a year and a half ago.

“*Now*,” Cooper continued, adding emphasis to his point. “*Now* I can say, without a doubt, that the time is right.”

Everyone paused like a held breath, and Will felt his heart thudding in his ears.

“Will, baby,” Cooper said, waving Will to approach. "Come up here."

Chest constricting, breath shallow, Will hesitantly stepped up. Cooper took his hand and held it tightly, kissing the top before he continued.

“The first time I laid eyes on you, you were just a lost dock worker looking for direction outside a flower shop. You couldn't make up your mind about which ones you wanted—you remember that?"

Will nodded slowly.

"I'll never forget how you smiled when I handed you that single stalk of snapdragons. I knew that second that I always wanted to be the man who helped you find your way."

When Cooper got down on one knee, everyone gasped.

"It's not a flower this time, but I hope you'll take it and let me guide you for the rest of our lives."

Will was silent as he watched Cooper present a small blue jewelry box, large fingers prying open the hinges. Wedged between two silky cushions was a Harry Winston, canary yellow, emerald cut diamond set inside a sterling silver double band.

"Will Graham. Will you marry me?"

The entire room dropped another stunned and excited gasp, then bundled back into silence.

Eyes burning, heart pounding, Will was ready to hurl the entire contents of his stomach. He had predicted this, but he had not expected it this soon. It was so grossly out of character, so completely false, so disgustingly frustrating that Will could barely contain his desire to scream.

He swallowed hard, forcing down every impulse inside him. He knew what he was expected to say, what he had to say, what he wanted to say.

"Yes," he said with a smile.

Cooper slipped the ring over Will's finger and stood up, scooping Will up into his arms, lips pressed against his new fiancé, kissing Will with a passion that almost crushed him.

The room erupted in applause and congratulatory cheers.

Dean and Carol came and hugged both of them.

"Champagne for everyone!" Dean announced.

For a second, as everyone's attention dropped him from the center of their focus, Will looked down at the gaudy jewelry adorning his hand.

Not a single part of Will Graham was represented in that reflective token. It was a ring for someone else—a man long gone—the man Will used to be. He should have felt more, but he didn't. Out of all the thoughts, emotions, and feelings that an engagement ring could have elicited, Will had only one attachment to its symbolism.

A sinister delight settled his stomach—a dark calm—and forced his lips into a wide smile.

Will Graham had officially entered the Kennedy sphere of influence.

Hannibal could smell the young man's nervous excitement leach from his freshly buffed pours.
He glanced at Gustav as the elevator ascended, watching him fix his hair in the gold reflection and assess his breath using a cupped palm. He found the mild fidgetiness and pungent enthusiasm reassuring.

Things were already off to an excellent start.

Hannibal understood that tonight required the accurate calculation of multiple variables to produce his desired outcome. It had many moving parts, Gustav's mood among them.

Before, Gustav had been apprehensive when they spoke about the advancement of their relationship. He questioned Hannibal's intentions in light of their last conversation, which had been—to put it mildly—intimidating.

Hannibal had agreed to continue their coupling under the conditional request that Gustav recant his previous confession to Cooper. It seemed like a strange request to Gustav at the time, but after he did finally talk to Cooper, Hannibal's attention increased tenfold, and his doubts quickly faded.

They re-established a courtship, and unlike before, Gustav was continually surprised by the adventures Hannibal wanted to go on.

Tonight was no different.

The Lichtman Thing was not a catered dinner party preceded by polite cocktail conversation under the appropriate holiday decor.

Not even close.

According to the rumor mill, guests could go up to that top-floor apartment and find everything from light beer to needles that sent heaven through swollen veins. Frequently populated with beautiful young bodies, these parties were said to offer limitless options for seductive dances, blowjobs in the bathroom, and—depending on who you were—a carefully locked bedroom door was available upon request.

There was supposedly a patio out back where the underbelly of the social elite sealed seedy agreements with a spit-laden handshake, sharing cigarettes as they took a hiatus from the greased-up air inside.

In fact, all of these things turned out to be true.

When Hannibal and Gustav walked through the front door, they immediately sensed the exhilarating energy of indulgence, which was nothing out of the ordinary—there were many taboo things, sure, but that was no different from the things they sought privately.

Hannibal and Gustav were very different men, but they could agree that they should enjoy life without the burden of shame.

It was apparent the guests shared this sentiment. A balance between mild and outrageous, regular attendees did enough to broker a slap on the wrists but not enough to end up with an overdosed prostitute in the bathroom. The Lichtman apartment was a microcosm of the aristocracy who understood the shadow of illegality under which they existed.

Charles Lichtman had been hosting this event since he first sipped at the chalice of money and power. A senatorship was all it took to bring out the very worst in his character, and Lichtman now regularly had a new escort or mistress at his side, always young, both male and female alike. Even though he now sat with pending murder charges under his belt, you wouldn't be able to tell had you not known the man.

Hannibal found Lichtman in the kitchen, surrounded by his friends and their young plus-ones. He leaned against the cracked window, taking a drag off a joint before exhaling a stream of billowy smoke, then drained the remnants of his craft beer bottle.

Not wanting to expose himself with a direct introduction, Hannibal took his time walking around, offering Gustav just enough inappropriate touches to make him look like hired company.

Gustav had no idea. He thought all the ass grabs and neck kisses were playful affection. Really, he had no reason to believe otherwise. The party for Hannibal's rich friend promised to be a good time, something they could enjoy together.

He was perfectly content—happy and horny.

When something finally caught his attention, he pecked Hannibal on the cheek and said he would be right back.

The separation presented the perfect opportunity for Hannibal to secure the party's supply of quality cocaine. He discreetly disposed of the evidence, produced two baby blue bags of tish, and left them on the bathroom sink. The seamless, blameless exchange made him the party's sole source.

Now, if Lichtman wished to participate in his favorite vice, he would have to seek out Hannibal.

And like clockwork, it took less than an hour.

"I hear you're the man of the hour," he said, coming up behind Hannibal, heavy hand on his shoulder.

"So it would seem," Hannibal offered a receptive face, soft around the edges, and invited the man in. "Hannibal Lecter."

"Charles Lichtman," The senator said with a firm and charismatic handshake.

Charles Lichtman did not look like a politician—more a mix of middle-aged suburban father and devil-may-care bachelor. His salt and pepper hair was neatly trimmed, and a pair of half-rimmed tortoiseshell glasses complimented his lined yet handsome features.

He wore a brooks brothers quarter zip and jeans, a freshly opened IPA in his hand that made it look like he was attending a neighborhood barbecue instead of a drug-fueled sex party.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Senator.”

“Oh, please. Call me Charlie,” Charles said with a charming and warm smile. Whoever this man truly was, it was evident he cared for his mask well. “Come on, Hannibal—Can I call you, *Hannibal*?”

“Please do.”

“Come on, Hannibal. Let’s go to my office. I’ll show you where you can settle in.”

Hannibal lightly tapped a razor into the white crested hill, slicing with quick, precise strokes, refining the powder to dust. He sectioned out four perfectly identical lines, pulled a short metal straw from his jacket pocket, plugged a nostril, and inhaled sharply until the chalky bitter stripe was nothing more than a taste sitting in the back of his throat.

Siphoning off the remnants by pinching his nose between thumb and index finger, he stood and offered the straw to Charles. The senator plopped down and cleaned the desk with his face.

“Gah!” he groaned, knocking his head back and sniffling hard. “You’re a good man, Lecter. High quality. I may have to replace my other guy.”

Hannibal went to the drink cart, coated the rim of a highball with orange and salt, then filled it with ice and pickled ginger, covering it in vodka. He handed the cocktail to Lichtman. “To clear the sinuses,” he said.

Charles raised his eyebrows, questioning it for less than a nanosecond. “I’ve trusted to this far,” he said with a shrug. He took the glass, clinked it against Hannibal’s, and together they upturned the contents.

Eyes squeezing tight, sucking in his cheeks, then opening his face in wide-eyed surprise, he looked down at the empty crystal. Chuckling gently, he looked over at Hannibal.

“Oh man,” he said, awestricken. “Hannibal Lecter, huh?”

“At your service.”

“You and I—we’re gonna be very good friends.”

They stayed there for a while, buzzing inside the high. Alone behind a locked door, the shared solitude closely resembled intimacy. The two men quickly left casual conversation behind and spoke briefly about the recent events of Lichtman’s criminal case that made headline news.

Lichtman was a savvy politician. Even from the very beginning, he had vehemently asserted his innocence—to his lawyers and the public. Caldwell Kennedy Berkshire & Reed built his defense case around his alleged innocence. With little evidence claiming otherwise, Cooper Kennedy turned eight counts of Murder in the 1st into three counts of Manslaughter before they ever stepped inside a courtroom.

Up until a few weeks ago, everything was going well. However, rather suddenly, Lichtman's lead defense lawyer started showing his ass.

Previously, Cooper Kennedy had always been calm and collected, diligent to his duties—a master of his craft. Even Charles noticed the change in his demeanor. The once suave socialite was sloppy, scatter-brained, and short-tempered (more than usual, anyway)

It got so bad that one day during proceedings, when the prosecution presented rather damning evidence against Lichtman, Mr. Kennedy fumbled instead of adapting, making three mistakes during a witness examination.

In any other circumstance, three is a forgivable number of blunders. In a criminal court case, three fuck ups are enough to land even an innocent man in jail.

In a matter of hours, the press severely shook the public’s perception of Lichtman’s innocence.

"Ink on paper. Might as well be set in stone,” Charles admitted to Hannibal, his eyes lost inside a thought.

Hannibal knew that Lichtman was guilty.

Killers knew killers.

Still, the man was distraught.

Hannibal understood the ominous nature of confinement and offered a consoling anecdote about the misconception of killers and innocent men alike.

“So often in times of war, innocence and condemnation are separated only by a uniform. Citizens who wear it while killing earn freedom. Citizens who kill without it earn incarceration. Guilt and innocence are nothing more that socially constructed point of view.”

And just like that, Charles became a prisoner of Hannibal Lecter’s bravado.

He brought Hannibal everywhere he went for the remainder of the night, hand magnetically attached to Hannibal’s shoulder.

The timing was impeccable enough to narrowly avoid any incident, each event sliding in front of the last with very little space between them. Should this continue, friction would force Hannibal to further lubricate the night.

Gustav came out of the woodwork after half a dozen drinks, one shirt poorer, two bumps richer. He walked into the den bare-chested, his fishnet stocking riding high on his waist

beneath his light wash jeans, and leaned his loose body against Hannibal. It was evident he had been dancing, chest heaving and lightly speckled in sweat.

"You should come dance, Han."

"Perhaps later," he said and kissed Gustav's jaw while the young man he slurped his drink, breath fogging the glass, looking over at Lichtman.

Charlie probably didn't notice how his tongue swashed over his lower lip as his eyes rode the length of Gustav's shapely body.

"Are you Han's friend?"

"His best friend," Charles teased.

"That means you're my best friend too, yes?" Gustav volleyed back, looking up through his eyelashes.

Hannibal and Gustav followed the direction without hesitation. Neither of them thought about it—it was just something they did. They were both hedonists that way.

Soon, the three men were in a world all their own, sharing a similarly salacious goal.

"Have you two seen the solarium yet?" Charles asked, implication lacing every word.

"I haven't," Gustav said, elbow perched on Hannibal's shoulder. "Have you, Han?" he said, slyly looking over at him.

"I have not," Hannibal replied, seduction making his face dark and beautiful. "Perhaps a tour is in order," he said to Charles.

"With pleasure."

The solarium was almost half the top floor—a greenhouse speckled with tropical plants and luxurious lounge furniture—and offered a private escape with a picturesque view of the midnight city.

The three men settled in, and it was somewhat romantic that Charles put some music on the record player before he sat down between Hannibal and Gustav.

Like everything else that happened that night, Charles Lichtman would later deny active participation in what followed, but Hannibal knew the real story. It was written by him, unfolding just as intended.

He would later recall that Charles started touching Gustav before the first song ended. A shared joint and two strong drinks later, touching turned into groping, and before long, lips and tongues were exploring the most enticing skin.

There was no talk—only approving glances and subtle nods. There was no attempt to force or rush anything. All three men recognized they were about to get exactly what they wanted.

All night long, Hannibal had cleverly avoided the mouths of other men. It wasn't that he morally objected to the idea. Sex was as it always had been, often meaningless but pleasurable all the same.

Hannibal had avoided the specific intimacy because it did nothing but remind him of Will. He knew how every other touch now paled in comparison to the soft presses of Will's supple skin.

Out of all the lustful bodies in attendance that night, not a single one enticed Hannibal Lecter the way Will Graham did.

So, Hannibal encouraged the other two men by feigning enthusiasm when they kissed him, but he didn't have to work hard to redirect them.

As soon as Gustav had a mouthful of distraction, Hannibal leaned back against the couch, fully dressed, and simulated a voyeuristic desire to watch.

Gustav and Charles seemed to appreciate the idea because as they disrobed, sucked, and fucked, they periodically glanced over to make eye contact with Hannibal, turned on by the private audience.

When it was over, they shared dirty jokes and iced gin—their sweat-laden bodies slumped deep into the furniture. Gustav passed out soon thereafter, and Charles got a kick out of his ability to wear out young men. He smacked the sleeping man's bare ass and invited Hannibal out for a cigarette.

They finally arrived at the destination Hannibal had been driving toward all night—the back patio. Once again, he took his time, conducting Charles Lichtman as if he were a one-man orchestra.

"You're a man of great leisure, Charles," Hannibal said, leaning in to receive the flickering yellow flame from Charles' sterling silver lighter. He inhaled deeply and released an elegant stream of smoke as if he had been doing it for years.

"I just follow my impulses instead of suppressing them," Charles replied, tapping his cigarette. "Restraint is the shit that causes cancer."

"Then you should outlive god," Hannibal jested.

"Immortality is the dream," Charles nodded with a soft laugh, a hint of truth hidden behind the remark.

Hannibal saw the way in and sneaked right through. "Do you indulge more now, knowing you face a possible life sentence?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"Undoubtedly," Hannibal chuckled. "I'd indulge in a great deal if faced with possible incarceration. However, I can't say I'd do so with such aplomb. Recklessness is an impulse I'm unable to deny."

“Can’t afford to be reckless,” Charles groaned, easing down in his chair. “Especially not with what’s been going on.”

“Your most recent court appearances?”

“Yeah—my fucking lawyers don’t seem to know their ass from their elbow.”

“They’re the most successful firm in New York.”

“That means absolute shit. You can hire the best, but you can’t fix stupid.”

“Perhaps it isn’t a lack of knowledge or skill, but a lack of enthusiasm.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s only human nature to change behavior when presented with new information. Loyalties weaken when in doubt."

“I mean—you think my firm changed their minds? They think I’m guilty now?”

“Given Mr. Kennedy’s most recent mistakes, it seems highly possible.”

"You think he's trying to sabotage the case?"

"In his defense, he may not be consciously aware he's doing it."

“Hm,” Charles mused. “Would explain a lot. I don’t know what I’d do about that. I couldn’t change legal counsel right now and still expect to win. Not good PR.”

“Then it’s a matter of regaining their loyalty.”

“Is that right?” Charles said, somewhat skeptical. “And how would you suggest I do that?”

“We can only truly dedicate to someone when you understand them. Should Mr. Kennedy come to understand the fear of possible incarceration, he may find his devotion renewed.”

Charles thought for a moment. “Coop used to come to these things, you know—used to be the life of the party too. He liked ‘em young. That’s why we got along.”

“The avoidance is of his career choice, I imagine.”

“No-no. This wasn’t even that long ago. He was here all the time before all this legal nonsense started.”

“So he’s shared similar experiences.”

“Very similar," Charles confirmed.

“A stride away from standing in your shoes.”

Gaze retracting into his thoughts, Charles went silent and considered that information. The seed had been planted. Soon it would blossom. “So,” he said, stepping back out of his headspace. “That-uh—That boy of yours. He’s quite a piece.”

“Gustav is an ideal companion,” Hannibal replied like an advertisement for the dog he had for sale.

Whatever he was selling, Charles was buying. “Hot. Young. Ready and willing.”

“He knows very few boundaries,” Hannibal added. “That’s a quality I admire.”

“Admirable traits,” Charles agreed with a rakish grin, stuffing out his cigarette. “I’d like to see more of him. You don’t mind sharing, do you, Lecter?”

“What’s mine is yours.”

As if they had just signed a legal contract, both men stood up, and when Charles Lichtman extended his hand, Hannibal Lecter shook it.

THE DEAD ZONE

1.

Beverly Katz would eventually look back on that brief period of no-contact and refer to it as *The Dead Zone.* It was the deserted highway that extended between two noteworthy mile markers—the headlining news that marked the beginning and the end.

A month, she would recall. Six weeks at most. Looking back, it seemed longer. Worry had a way of doing that; stretching time to its highest tension.

Will showed up at work less and less, and his work schedule dwindled until he stopped showing up altogether. Soon thereafter, the routine calls and text messages went unanswered. He had all but disappeared into an unsettling silence, leaving Beverly to grapple with the weight of his absence.

Then, without warning, a bold headline scrawled across the Manhattan society paper and shattered the extended silence.

'Heir Announces Engagement. Young Graham to Adopt the Kennedy Legacy.'

The 10 words burned inside her eyes, forever etching themselves in her mind. She scanned the article several times, hoping with a held breath for some kind of mistake, only to reach the same tragic epiphany.

It was true. Will Graham was, in fact, marrying Cooper Kennedy, the man who wore his toxic behaviors like badges.

How and when did this happen?

Beverly had thought Will and Cooper's relationship had been rocky on the fast track to a timely end. Will had admitted as much not long ago, when Beverly discovered him out on the fire escape, ass planted in his roommate's lap. After that conversation, she assumed—maybe she wished more than assumed—that her friend was finally ready to leave Mr. Kennedy.

Clearly, that had been premature.

It didn't bother Beverly that Will hadn't told her about the engagement. Well, it did. But not enough to make her selfish. Will was often quiet, and neither of them had heavy expectations of their friendship. Extended periods of silence weren't often a cause for concern.

That wasn't her problem. Her displeasure was bigger than that.

Every day for nearly two years now, she watched Will violate one of life's simplest principals and try to fit a square peg into a round hole. No matter how much he scraped against the

edges of someone else's life, he ignored the pain and continued to force himself into a place he didn't belong.

While it was possible that they had resolved their relationship issues to grow stronger than ever, Beverly doubted it. Cooper Kennedy had a knack for getting what he wanted, manipulating every situation to his advantage, and it terrified Beverly to think about Will conceding to a lifetime of that abuse.

She had tried to express her concern during a rather brief conversation at his apartment when she showed up unannounced, society paper tucked up under her arm.

The memory of how he acted that day would remain with her forever.

He had opened the door like nothing had happened, untroubled and nonchalant.

"Beverly, hey! What are you doing here?"

"Well," Beverly started, stepping inside without removing her jacket. "I haven't heard from you in weeks, for one. And two," she said, unfolding the paper to display the front page, "you never asked me to be your maid of honor." The words were sharp and sarcastic. She tossed the paper aside and folded her arms. "You wanna tell me what's going on?"

Will rubbed his face and sighed. "I'm sorry for not calling Bev. The whole thing was rather sudden."

"Sudden?" Bev replied. "I'd say a bitch slapping surprise is more like it."

Will walked them into the living room, more casual than Bev thought he would be, considering the circumstances, and remained silent as he poured them both a drink. They sat down and Beverly waited a moment, changing her approach. Looking at him in that moment, sitting in his faded denim and t-shirt, the same simple man he had always been, Beverly's anger had faded. This was her friend, and she remembered her worry.

"What's going on, Will?"

"I'm getting married," Will said, dismissive, just like he always was. Just like she expected him to be.

"To Cooper Kennedy?"

"Yep," he said through a sip.

"Are you out of your mind?" Her tone remained affectionate. "My head's still vibrating from that headline. It's like I'm watching a horror movie I don't want to watch."

Will chuckled. "That bad?"

Beverly smiled, realizing how severe that may have sounded. "Ok, maybe not horror," she said with a laugh, "but still scary."

Will glanced down, avoiding eye contact. There was truth there, something he heard and absorbed. So she continued.

“Will, listen. If you’re happy, I’m happy. But,” she paused long enough to collect his eye contact, “this doesn’t seem like you. Are you sure you’re ok?”

He had looked at her in an almost terrifying way. “Do I not seem ok to you?”

“You seem ok. But you also seem different,” she replied.

“Different?” Will asked, brow inquisitive.

“Yeah.” She continued. “The *different* that tries to hide that something’s wrong. I know you aren’t alright, Will.”

“I’m engaged,” he said, deflecting once again. “This is the happiest time of my life.”

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding me?” She asked with sincerity. “Because you know I can see it. Cause you know I’d ask?”

“There’s nothing to see, Bev. I know I haven’t talked to you, but I’ve just been busy.”

“I’ve always told you the truth when you asked for it. Return the favor?”

“I’m fine.” Will looked at her, his face unreadable. “I wanted this engagement to happen. Cooper and I are on a journey together now. I know what I’m doing, and I need you to trust that.”

“What about Hannibal?” Bev asked.

“He’s supportive,” Will replied.

“Are you two—”

“No,” he said, quick to cut her off before she finished.

Years later, Beverly would recount that conversation—its implications, if not the actual, literal content—as proof of her own failure to him as a friend.

Would things have been different if she had asked the right question? “Will, do you need help?” or “Will, why can’t you tell me what’s going on?” or “Will, are you safe?” Any of those questions had the potential to draw out the truth, and any honest answer might have led to a larger conversation that was reparative, or at the very least, preventative.

But she didn’t ask any of those questions. She didn’t even try. She just replied, “Okay,” and left the apartment.

It had all been right in front of her, but somehow she missed it.

This cycle would repeat itself once more. A period of no-contact would precede a life altering headline.

The second time was more ubiquitous. The second series of events, and subsequently, the second headline, would reach far beyond the local society paper. It had been an earworm—an unforgettable alliteration. For months it plagued newspapers and tv broadcasts alike, and later, it would plague Beverly's entire life.

'Deadly Doctors'

Maybe a commercial or a television show would have a similar title. Maybe she would read it somewhere or a friend would say it in passing, attached to an altogether different topic. But every single time she encountered those two words, an eerie sensation would trickle down Beverly Katz's spine like a whisper, raising the hair on the back of her neck.

Doc.

It had been a joke, an affectionate pet name she'd given to the simple man who draped blue shop towels across his workspace, performing ordinary repairs as though it were surgical procedures.

Those seemingly innocuous qualities that comprised Will Graham's personality would become so distinct in Beverly's mind that they were no longer traits, but warning signs.

Had those skills, the ones cultivated in the shipyard, portend the skills used to commit atrocities? Had Will always been 'The Doctor' Beverly claimed him to be?

Often enough, Solene would remind her it was all coincidence.

"You didn't know. You aren't responsible for the past," she'd say, and Beverly would always nod and admit that she was right.

But deep down, Beverly would always question.

Had she known all along?

2.

Something new was happening, something that seemed to Will like it had always been budding below his soul, a seed about to sprout.

The sharpness was new. The pleasure was new. The delight was new—not the normal effervescent delight that came with laughter—but the delight that pulled like gravity when inexplicable fear strikes inside the darkness.

By the time Will made his last cut, the air had grown rancid and thick. It was astounding how much heat a dead corpse continued to give off, even hours after the life was cold.

The low light amplified and echoed all the surrounding sounds. He could hear Hannibal just behind him, the occasional shuffle of shoes as he moved from one end of the table to the other. Water ran through the network of pipes above him, gurgling in controlled bursts as another spray from the industrial faucet sent viscous blood through the floor drain.

A gentle flood of soapy water washed under Will's feet, wetting the souls of his rubber shoes. The rain outside only added to the odd sensation of standing inside a morbid puddle.

Had this always been his fate? Even as a child? Was he meant to play like this his entire life? Had something always clutched his chest, tugging at his shirt to make his innocent heart itchy and painful? Blood staining the floors, evidence of the atrocities that had taken place, a coldness to the air, death hanging in the room like smoke?

These interludes had become a facet of Will and Hannibal's everyday life. It was the same sequence every time, delegating responsibilities through a near telepathic connection. They had perfected the art over time until they worked together in unison.

Will had been an excellent student, natural in his talent. His hands grew steady with precision, taught how to make the perfect cut. He conducted each disembowelment, performing each function between the steel table and the long wooden tool bench. Hannibal performed auxiliary functions that served Will's now perfected process. Their bodies worked around each other with grace and ease, never bumping or tripping, almost clairvoyant to the other's intended steps.

It was seamless.

Each day was an exploration of flesh in small increments, both inside and out. The hands that plunged to caress a freshly taken heart were the same hands that grazed against each other as they worked side by side. They were soft, brushing like feathers, but intentional—purposeful.

Will felt Hannibal's arm snake around his waist, his plush lips meeting the exposed vein on Will's neck. Will closed his eyes, unable to stop how the large, encasing body made his heartbeat slow to elongated, rich cords. He reached back for Hannibal's face, fingertips stained crimson, and turned to kiss him.

"From what I've tasted of desire—" Hannibal whispered into Will's open mouth.

With gasping breath, Will replied, "—I hold with those who favor fire."

This experience held an unnamed sensation, one Will could never generate on his own, and in that moment, hearing those words, the only thing Will could relate it too was peace.

Will's mind was forever linking one thought to a million others, producing unspeakable conclusions without his permission, a function that necessitated a plan for deflection and distortion that accompanied his every interaction with the world around him. He had spent

years cultivating a socially acceptable facade by keeping most of his thoughts to himself, hiding the evidence of any oddity that might distinguish himself from others.

This space offered solace from that habitual process.

There was no way to explain the sense of contentment and security Will found in that old factory, or why those moments spent with Hannibal on the floor of a slaughterhouse seemed almost meditative. Here, all internal noise silenced, and he could connect a logical stream of consciousness to the actions of each hand. With clear intention, the cutting edge of his scalpel opening the pink flesh, exposing the life inside, a process of internal change began.

Hannibal slid his hand up Will's torso, pressing him back into his monstrous chest.

"I feel your expansion, Will."

Will felt the warmth of Hannibal's breath on the back of his neck, sending arousal coursing through his body.

"Can you feel it, the metamorphosis? As if you were mutilating your flesh and bones to make room for the growth from within?"

Will's breath caught in his throat as Hannibal's words hung in the air, a shiver running down his spine. A strange connection was forming, a relationship that transcended the superficial elements—something more than an emotional attachment. He was reaching into him, opening something up and setting it free.

Will felt the monster, the cannibal, the true killer like a seed inside him, burst forth, growing and stretching, sending roots deep into his heart, then spreading up into his flesh, giving him new structure.

"Yes," he uttered, dropping his head back to Hannibal's shoulder.

Will's heart raced with anticipation as those hands moved to undo his belt and pants. He watched with eager eyes as Hannibal knelt before him, taking him in his mouth with practiced ease. The heat of Hannibal's mouth was overwhelming, and Will reached down and held Hannibal's head back as he rolled his hips, pulling out until his cockhead teased Hannibal's lips and let out a low grunt as he slid his entire length into the receptive mouth.

"Ahgod. Hannibal."

Will gripped Hannibal's shoulder, feeling the muscle beneath his shirt. Hannibal's tongue continued to trace his length, swirling over the head, then swallowed him down, a low rumble of satisfaction emanating from his chest.

Will lulled into the sensation, indulging himself, when a thought materialized.

Where are you taking me?

It was his thought, but he didn't know why it was his thought. Hannibal's head bobbed up and down, sucking Will in and releasing him with every movement, and Will lost himself.

The smell of coppery blood. The sing of metal tools. The warmth of life. The chill of death. The smell of decay and sex. The base of nearby music. The flashing neon lights.

He was in his thoughts, lost in his body, when behind his closed eyes, a series of images developed like film. Will was no longer in the factory, but in the woods across from his former house, aglow from its yellow lit windows. Someone was inside. He didn't know who, but the dread it elicited was unbearable.

An instant later, Will was in his house, his body moving without him. The floor slanted. The lights extinguished. He could see the room as if he were standing in the doorway. Will watched his body walk inside, leaving the door ajar. He could feel his cheeks, wet with tears. It was all so clear, and then...

...Hannibal was still kneeling in front of him, but Will couldn't see him. He was fading, the image in his mind flickering in and out. Hannibal's tongue lashed over his cock head, hands cupping his balls. Will could feel the pressure building, dread lurking behind it when...

...Someone was inside his house. He didn't want to go in there, but he wanted to know because something about the fear inside him felt like ecstasy. He rocked harder, finding his pleasure, chasing the sensation. Hannibal's hands gripped the backs of his thighs as Will thrusted faster, deeper, moaning as he...

...was inside his house, and the terror gripped him, white and suffocating.

Eyes shooting open, breath seizing, Will bucked his hips as he cried out and came into Hannibal's mouth, pulsing out cum in diminishing quantities until he emptied. Will was floating, reaching for something, but as he trickled back down into his body, the memory faded to nothing.

His legs trembled, and he slumped back against the table, ass hitting the cold metal. Hannibal had his mouth over him, licking him clean as he stroked Will's thighs.

Will's body felt sated, but his mind was still restless. He stepped back from Hannibal, who rose to meet his gaze. They stood there for a moment, the silence punctuated with heavy breathing and the reverberating music from the bar across the street.

Even as he reveled in the carbonated purity of his post orgasm high, Will felt a sense of unease creep up. He swallowed, eyes scanning the space in front of him, searching for his mind to explain itself.

Will tried to stop himself, but he knew Hannibal could feel how his body trembled, could sense the fear that was twisting around in his gut. He wrapped his arms around Will's waist, pulling him close, and whispered into his ear,

"What is it, my love?"

Will closed his eyes, letting the sound of Hannibal's voice wash over him. He knew he could trust Hannibal, but for whatever reason, that felt irrelevant. He stepped away, putting himself back together.

“It’ll be daylight soon. We should get going,” he said, brushing off the intimate moment that preceded his unease. He could feel Hannibal’s eyes on him as he started collecting their things, could feel the piercing stare, but he wasn’t about to look back.

While he wanted to speak, just as much as Hannibal wanted to listen, Will couldn’t articulate the experience even if he wanted to.

“Will,” Hannibal said, stepping forward to find his eye contact, “If there is something on your mind, you can tell me.”

“I’m ok.”

Of course, that wasn't good enough. Hannibal refused the deflection. He stepped forward, grabbing Will by the arms and finding his eye contact in earnest.

“You can conceal many things outside of this room, but I assure you, this space holds no damnation. There's nothing to hide from here."

But he looked into Hannibal's eyes with a strange sense of déjà vu, a remembrance of some impending doom. It was the same sensation that fluttered behind his closed eyes, that carried him into his house—the exact feeling that made him leave. He still couldn’t give it a name, but it was growing inside him, an ache that throbbed with the beat of his heart.

“I appreciate it, I do,” Will replied, trying to twist his face back into a pleasant expression. “But I really just need sleep."

“You aren’t required to express your vulnerability, but I’d hope you’d want to. Honesty has a way of emerging, even when uninvited,” Hannibal offered, still holding Will firmly.

Will could admit anything he wanted when they were alone here together. That didn’t mean he had to say anything aloud.

“I’m *honestly* exhausted and *honestly* wish you’d shut up so we can get out of here,” Will said, half joking, half serious. He met Hannibal’s gaze as he spoke and held it until the other man nodded in acceptance.

“As you wish.”

Hannibal stepped away and Will continued to pack up, put things away, stuffing everything back inside and seal it up tight.

It was all he could do.

For so long Will had shied away from violence, but now that he participated in its creation, he realized how much death surrounded him all these years, and how he banished the causes and effects of it from his waking life.

There were walls around every unpleasant connection.

Now that he was killing, experiencing physically what he could only previously imagine, his interal forts were growing in number. With each life he extinguished, these defenses grew stronger, building the barriers that separated him from the full weight of his actions.

But cracks were forming. The walls were leaking.

He knew that some type of freedom sat inside that gripping white, that flashing image. While a part of him yearned for that release—the unburdening of confinement, no matter how grim the result—every time he approached the precipice, something stopped him.

It was as if the expanse of his existence, his humanity, sat inside a handful of blurred images, and if he were to step back and see it clearly, it would destroy him.

NOW & BEFORE

1.

Gustav wasn't an addict.

Yes, he did drugs. Yes, he did a lot of them. But he wasn't an addict. Charles. Charles was an addict. Charles' rich friends they were addicts. That girl with tracks in her arms who kept showing up parties and making a scene in front of everyone, yelling about how he was a piece of shit who left her broke and gave her gonorrhea? She was definitely an addict. Really, Gustav's recreational habit was tame compared to some of the powerful political figures he now knew on a disturbingly intimate level.

So, when his boss used the term 'addict' one morning two weeks ago, Gustav felt it was a tad extreme. Yes, he had shown up late, but who didn't? He had gotten away with it before, the staying out all night then going into work the next day, but on that day, his luck had finally run out.

Marvin fired him on the spot.

It didn't matter, though. The environment had always been toxic and most of his coworkers got on his nerves, anyway. He actually preferred it this way. With more free time, he could make a lot more money than he ever made at the shop.

Charles was a generous benefactor. He paid handsomely for Gustav's company, enough to afford the recently unemployed barber some financial stability. He figured that if he could maintain the old man's attention long enough, he could eventually open his own shop in Brooklyn, perhaps live closer to Hannibal. At least that's what *he* had in mind. He didn't know what his *boyfriend* felt the same way.

Gustav hadn't heard from his Hannibal in a few days. Not that it really bothered him. Their relationship was unconventional, and Gustav enjoyed telling people that fact when they routinely asked if he felt lonely or neglected, or told him that "sounds like he's not as invested in the relationship."

While he sometimes longed for the initial flurry of attention he received at the beginning, Gustav acknowledged that relationships often changed.

They had maintained their coupling for months now. And yes, they were a couple. Yes, this was a relationship.

Even though recently he saw Charles more than he saw Hannibal, Gustav still continued to prioritize Hannibal in his mind. To him, Charles was simply an employer and Hannibal was his home.

At least, that's what Gus wanted him to be.

Who knew? Perhaps they would even take the plunge and move in together after the Kennedy wedding—after Will finally moved out. To him, the timeline seemed fated.

The thought of that sent a fluttering bird through his chest. He swallowed it down and returned to his thoughts. Next time he saw Hannibal, he would broach the topic and explore the possibilities.

Right now, though, he had more important things to do.

He sank down onto his knees, leaned over the coffee table, and inhaled his third line of cocaine. He shoved a finger into his gums, wiped his nose, then passed the small tray back to the men on the couch.

"Thanks, baby," Charles said, taking a line for himself before passing it on.

They had reached the level of intoxication necessary for strategical seduction.

He knew the routine so well that all he had to do was let himself get lost in the haze of drugs and lust. It was a strange agreement they had—the blackmailer and the bait—but Gus had long given up on trying to understand it. Yes, he knew all about Senator Lichtman, but that didn't matter. Not anymore.

Gustav leaned back and let Charles' greedy hands roam over his body.

Dave, or whatever his name was, watched until he couldn't resist any longer and fumbled around until he pulled out his chubby cock and started stroking.

Gustav was good at this game. He knew it.

Men were always attracted to his body that way, the way that made them want to be on it and in it, the way that compelled them to make bad decisions in order to get it. With nights like this, Gus sank into the familiar egotism that came with being desired and reveled in the small power it afforded him.

He sucked that dirty politician's cock right to the edge, stopping just short of making him nut. That was the place Charles liked his friends, dangling the prize just outside their reach, willing to do anything to get it. Soon enough, Dave was in the most compromising position of his life, so focused on pounding into Gustav's ass that he didn't even notice when Charles snapped a photo with his phone.

Hours later, Gustav stumbled out of the luxurious apartment, sticky and sweaty, buzzing loud from the sex and the drugs. The world outside was cold and unwelcoming, the sound of the traffic on the busy street jarring after the sauna-like atmosphere of the apartment.

He wrapped his coat tighter around himself, then reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. It chimed almost immediately, and a few taps later, Gustav sent $1,500 to his bank account.

A heavy pang of shame twisted his stomach.

Gustav had enjoyed himself, as he often did, and the exploration had been fun and enticing, as it always was.

Still.

That photo existed now when it hadn't existed before, and Gus had to live with that fact.

Maybe he had gone too far this time, but he couldn't truly bring himself to care. Everyone had to make their way in the world. And what did it really matter, anyway? It wasn't his fault that politicians wanted to fuck him, nor was he responsible for anything that happened after the fact.

Yes, last night might have been a bit fucked up, but nights like that were far better than the nights when he and Charles were alone.

$1,500 was a lot of money, but somehow it didn't seem like enough to make up for how hard Charles would choke him.

2.

Cooper Kennedy stepped out of the dimly lit hallway, into the early morning haze. Only hours ago, it had been the center of his universe. Now, the brick building faded behind the fog that enveloped the neighborhood, leaving the previous night behind. His long strides took him further and further away, the city streets stretching out before him, completely oblivious to the secret he stole from that apartment.

As he hastened down the sidewalk, his tailored suit sagged as if it no longer appropriately fit his frame. When several strands of hair fell into his face, he used his palm to sweep it back, checking a passing window to assess what he knew was a less than acceptable appearance.

That morning, Cooper had forgotten his usually composed demeanor in the throes of early morning, cast off without care, now replaced by a worry that shook all his seams loose. As he stepped off the corner, a gust of wind filtered through his clothing, dragging with it the lingering smell of indecency.

He would have to shower before he took Will to dinner. He sighed, flushed with a mixture of annoyance and guilt.

It was strange for Cooper to experience any emotional upheaval, let alone guilt, but this had become more and more common recently.

That had been evident.

Making amends with Charles had been one of his top priorities. Regaining favor with clients was an occupational hazard, usually accomplished with high-quality alcohol at expensive locations. For Cooper and Charles, a handful of previous encounters gave them a history, one that Cooper tapped into. While he worked the Lichtman case, he shied away from maintaining the same social circle as Charles, avoiding parties and events that he previously attended routinely.

But considering the circumstances, Cooper found that conceding to a few risky nights in exchange for Lichtman's continued trust was a small price to pay.

Saying *yes* had been easy.

Saying *no* had not.

Playing back the events from last night, all the times he said yes, he realized the enormity of his indulgence.

Cooper knew his actions could tarnish not only his reputation, but his relationship with Will, and the sudden thought of Will intensified his worry, adding a dash of shame.

Cooper loved Will. He really did.

Just recently, he had proposed to Will—publicly. If something were to happen in their relationship, if Will were to expose anything, it would only magnify the controversy—a situation Cooper was certain Will would prefer to avoid, for his own sake.

Of course, Will wasn't in any position to judge Cooper's behavior. He had a closet full of skeletons, ones far worse than Cooper's. And Cooper had lost count of the number of mistakes Will had made in their relationship.

Memories of past arguments and disagreements resurfaced, presenting themselves as evidence to support his innocence. Cooper could recall all the times he had forgiven Will, moments when trust had been broken but ultimately rebuilt, and that had all been in thanks to Cooper's benevolence.

A sense of defiance welled up inside him, fueling the conviction that he'd done nothing wrong and the hypothetical anger Will might hypothetically feel was unjustified. Even if Will found out, what was he going to do? Leave?

Cooper chuckled to himself.

Without Cooper, Will would be inside the prison system, facing his own lack of morality. So when it really came down to it, Cooper had already atoned for all his past mistakes and ran up a credit on all future transgressions.

Will had no choice but to forgive him.

And that was enough to break the chains of his self-reflection.

He acknowledged that comparing his actions to Will's wasn't a fair or valid argument, that the two really didn't compare at all. This wasn't a mistake, therefore it carried no consequences, and he could let it vanish into his past without mentioning it to anyone.

The more he walked, the more he realized that the forgiveness he demanded—even if he never admitted to anything—could be and would be accepted, because he really didn't have time to think about this. He had bigger issues, such as his career, which was the entire reason he had even been inside that apartment.

That, in and of itself, was proof of his dedication to his life with Will and his devotion to making it the envy of the world around them.

Mustering the last remnants of his resolve, reassuring himself again and again that despite how his gut doubted him, the foundation of his life was unshakeable and even if it wasn't, no one would ever know what he had done.

Yet, beneath the surface of his rationalizations, doubt lingered.

3.

An inexplicable transition took place outside that building, something Hannibal witnessed so often that its prescience was now commonplace.

Will stepped out into the frigid morning, the vapor of his breaths suspended in the air, wearing an expression of feint surprise. He paused, eyes making small shifts in front of him, taking in the world as if he hadn't expected it to still be there.

It was intriguing, like watching water solidifying to ice.

Though the behavior had only developed recently, it wasn't without precedence. Hannibal had seen Will in a similar state, a muted version though it may have been, after an episode of sleep walking. When he would wake, Will would greet consciousness with both gratitude and terror, seeming both reconciled and misplaced in reality. An interval of silence would always follow, just as it did on their journey home that morning.

Hannibal refrained from speaking during that time, feeling that Will had voided his own lexicon and even the few words he might say weren't truly there. It was as if he held the previous hours like ink inside a pen, refusing to etch it onto a page and solidify the memory, and Hannibal felt certain that in those moments, Will intentionally forgot himself.

They made their way back to the apartment, the brick building nothing more than a silhouette in the predawn haze, city lights reflecting in the polished cornices, glinting like eyes.

As they stepped off the curb to reach N 8th St, a man passed, hands plunged into his pockets. Hannibal made brief eye contact with the pedestrian, and in return he offered a nod as he went. Although he had seen the two men, honoring that recognition by allowing them space

on the crosswalk, he did not know them at all. He came and went, completely unaware of where the two men had just come from or what they had just done.

Hannibal glanced over at Will—his eyes cast to the ground, soft brown curls falling across his forehead—contemplative.

The man was and always had been an enigma, true enough, but that aspect of their relationship had never negated the strong and unending connection they shared. Yet at that moment, the obscurity of this new disposition felt indecipherable, and it was turning Will into a stranger.

Since the engagement, and that is to say, since the initiation of their plan to cut through the Kennedy world, there had been a gradual shift in Will—paced by the ever increasing severity of their pursuits—that grew more significant by the day.

At the start, Will experienced each manipulation of Cooper Kennedy's life with vengeful enthusiasm. Now, it often seemed Will was an observer rather than a participant.

The closer they came to freedom, the farther away Will seemed.

They made it to the front door and, as was customary, Hannibal fumbled with the keys. Will waited beside him, arms tucked under his armpits, knees rocking in and out, ready to be out of the unforgiving elements. The lock had barely enough time to unlatch before he pushed the door open and rushed inside.

The lobby, however, with its high ceiling and marble floor, offered no reprieve from the cold outside.

"Fuck, it's cold," was the first thing Will said as he nearly ran to the elevator.

He held the gate open, waving Hannibal in—as if there were any other direction for him to go—and yanked it closed in a high squeal the second they were both on board.

Hannibal locked the gate, inserted the key, pressed the 4th floor button, and the elevator started it jerky ascent.

Perhaps it was the age of the machinery. Perhaps the rickety gate came unlocked. Perhaps the wiring was bad or the electricity went out. Perhaps, due to the cold, the metal shrank and a bolt came loose.

Or, perhaps, the elevator was fed up with how often it had been ignored over the past two years and decided it would issue one final, defiant, warning.

The machine groaned in protest, rudders creaking low, uncoiled cables clicking as they faltered, and the large gears grinned to a halt.

Will and Hannibal had less than a second to look at each other before weightlessness made their hearts stop.

The elevator suspended them in mid-air before giving up and finally letting go.

Seconds passed in accelerated time, disorienting and blurring every thought, leaving only action, and suddenly the carriage stuttered to a loud, screeching halt.

Pressed against the wall, Hannibal found himself pinned by Will's body, the young man exerting his full weight on the large brass brake lever. Arms slung firmly around his waist, Hannibal held onto Will so tightly that he could feel the ridges of his spine pressing into his chest, shoulders rising and falling as he breathed, rigid tension extending into every muscle.

Hannibal blinked in stunned disbelief.

Will's preparedness—as if trained to value life for every potential disaster and his equal dedication to preventing it—was irrevocably impressive, especially in moments such as these. The ability had been amusing to Hannibal, initially, but somehow less so as the young man arm's flexed over the break, ensuring it remain in place.

Hannibal reached up with both hands to help engage it.

By now, they had spent so much time in the cold that Will had certainly lost sensation in his fingers. Hannibal's warm hands encased the white knuckled grip, feeling the sheer force of Will's exertion that plied desperately to prevent an impending plummet to the depths.

He added his efforts and the lever made a loud metallic snap as it slid into place. Will continued to hold on, muscles trembling under the strain, unwilling to release.

Hannibal leaned in, nose softly nuzzling into the dark curls, lips hovering over the young man's ear, and whispered with soft reassurance.

"I've got you."

And that was enough. Body easing under Hannibal's hold, Will let go.

He reached out and reset the breaker, unengaged the break, turned the key, and pressed the 4th floor button.

The returning ascent was scarier than the initial drop, but both men continuing to brace against the wall. The elevator had to be as loud as it always had been, but both Will and Hannibal heard nothing but their thudding heartbeats, wide eyes watching the floors count up.

When it arrived, Hannibal pushed them both forward, and Will unlocked the gate, inserting his key into the front door with a speed and precision that Hannibal had never seen, and they toppled forward, both of them stumbling in, nearly tripping each other.

They found solid footing, legs trembling, bodies readjusting to the stability of the hallway. They stood inside the foyer, panting from the effort and panic, and looked at each other.

It was so deliciously warm inside the apartment, so safe and fragrant, that both men, at last, felt weak with relief.

They were home, spared, exhausted and euphoric.

Will grinned at Hannibal, and Hannibal grinned back. A warm giddiness washed over Will, a visible ease, and it grew in volume and depth until he was laughing so hard that he dropped back to the wall for support.

Hannibal watched as Will's body surrendered to the mirth, the creases at the corners of his eyes deepening as his smile widened, and patiently waiting as the bouts dissipated.

Will caught his breath and smiled with a sigh.

"What is it?" Hannibal asked, amusement lighting his eyes.

When Will looked at him, it was as if the words sat in his mouth, but, worried they would spoil the moment, he let them dissolve.

"Nothing," he replied, gaze cast into the pleasant thought, tending to it like a secret until it was gone.

The elation vanished and was replaced by something else.

Eyes unblinking, brow drawing together, Will looked as if he were oddly close to tears.

There was something there, something Hannibal had witnessed but not seen, and for the first time, he worried that Will was separating from, not only himself, but the connection they shared.

In that hallway—a space that bridged the gap between their separate worlds—Hannibal stood, suspended in limbo, just outside the private areas that had once fostered the intimacy of their life together.

Hannibal had offered himself—his house, room, and body—openly, certain it would garner reciprocity, and without realizing it, an inequality had permeated their shared existence. From the moment they escaped, it had been Will who had borne the brunt of that sacrifice, willingly abandoning his own personal space to occupy Hannibal's world.

How many times had they been here in this hallway? How many times had they faced this crossroad? How many times had they chosen on end of the hall instead of the other? How many times had Will left his room behind so that he could enter Hannibal's?

If this were the divide, then Hannibal would breach it.

He walked over to Will, reached out and collected his cold fingers, pressing a kiss to the top.

Will looked up at him, those lost eyes, reflective as a mirror, subtly searched until they latched onto Hannibal's garnet gaze.

With a voice carried by a gentle insistence, laced with a tenderness that spoke volumes—a tone he almost didn't recognize himself—Hannibal reached for the man he loved.

"Shall we sleep in your room tonight?"

With a ghost of a smile, Will nodded.

THE BELL JAR

Chapter Notes

This chapter starts off immediately following the events of the last chapter. Same morning/day.

1.

An amalgam of viscous red, opaque and gooey, flicking and shaking, painted splatters as it closed in around his life. It mixed like oil and turpentine, pungent like ammonia, and sucked him downward, closing in around him like quicksand.

From the airless pit—a consciousness grew.

Waking behind closed eyelids, Will rubbed his cheek against the pillow, drawing in a deep breath, the feint hint of bleach still staining his nostrils. Beside him, he could feel the weight, the bulk, the volume of a body, uncertain if it was real. He sent an arm out under the blankets, hand landing on the reality. His fingers threaded through the hair on Hannibal's chest, and he scooted a little closer, nose pressed to skin, inhaling the sweet aroma—musk and copper, sweet cherry blossoms, the delicious remnants of amber heat. He popped one eye open, the bright sun diffused behind white rain clouds, soaking the sleeping man beside him in the gentlest of light.

Will smiled.

Pointing his toes toward the bottom of the bed, he flexed his body into a deep and alleviating stretch, ringing out the soreness from the previous day then went limp. He let a warm ease settle inside him, enjoying it for everything it contained and everything it lacked.

More and more often, Will found he didn't question his contentment. Not the way he used to. Not the way he should.

These moments never lasted long—sometimes subsiding the second he sat up—but over the past few weeks, as his mind fought him more and more often, he tried to concentrate on the minutes of reprieve, whenever and wherever they occurred.

Heavy and slow, Will rolled over to check the time, and just like that, the moment was gone, leaving just as quickly as it arrived.

There, under the lamp, tossed aside without care, sat his engagement ring, the canary yellow diamond shadowed and dull.

Will heard the thoughts knocking quietly in his mind, thoughts that associated themselves with the relationship that preceded the ring's inhabitance on his nightstand. He had agreed to wear that god awful thing and now he had to deal with the consequences that followed, of which he was experiencing every single day.

The new year had come and gone, the initial uproar surrounding the engagement had settled, and Cooper had returned to work with heightened dedication. Desperate to regain any favor lost with Lichtman, he made himself readily available—at Charles' beck and call. That had been an effort to save his career—so Cooper would regularly say—but in actuality, had been motivated by Cooper's desperate need to maintain his father's approval.

Dean had expressed his displeasure over Cooper's mishandling of the Lichtman case, as well as his irritation for having to clean up his son's mess, over dinner one evening shortly after the blunder made headlines. Will witnessed the tense conversation—as he was now included in familial topics—where Dean, on multiple occasions, belittled Cooper's character and choices, claiming that his son was soft, had always been soft, had chosen a soft lifestyle, and if he were any kind of Kennedy man, he would have handled the problem long before it ever became an issue.

When Dean and Cooper exited to the study for a private lesson in consequences and recompense—as Will could attest to, knowing all to well what happened when left in a room alone with a Kennedy man—Will sat with Carol in the drawing room. She poured an extra large cocktail for both of them and explained how she, as a spouse, handled the social and legal ramifications of her husband's poor choices.

It had been endearing in its own way.

She spoke calm and quiet, fingers fiddling with her pearl necklace as she gazed into the fireplace, recounting horrific past experiences as though they were the most benign memories.

This was the way things were for Carol, the way they always had been, and while she had long emptied herself of the compassion needed to care for her soon to be son-in-law's well-being, she knew Will was resigning himself to a similar fate. So she offered her advice, the only advice she could with limited amount of freedom she had, and though distant and condescending, it was the only affection Carol Kennedy had to offer.

She brought up the wedding—again. She told Will that when a shadow was cast over the family, it was best to bring in the light, often, if not always, in the form of a grand social gathering.

While he had every intention of putting off wedding plans, Will wasn't sure how much longer he could fight the persistent efforts of Mother Kennedy, who had embarked on a ceaseless campaign to initiate preparations.

When he tried to brush off the topic, Carol reminded him that, "A Kennedy Wedding is a historical event," and, "it will be remembered for decades," so the planning wasn't something he should take lightly because, "it is a privilege," to "honor The Legacy."

“No less than 500 people will be in attendance,” she told him with flagrant pride, as if the amount of people who sat inside the reception of an overpriced party had anything to do with a sacred union.

Honest to god, these people thought they were royalty.

June had been the original date, but that quickly changed when, after returning from their father-son meeting in the study, Dean decided that they should wait until the conclusion of the Lichtman case, so win or loose, the wedding would be a way to curry favor in the public eye.

Truthfully, Will had no idea if he would get married or not. He had no idea how long it would take to tear down the cage around him, and it was completely plausible that he might see his own wedding before his devious goals came to fruition.

Hannibal and Will had dealt the first blow, and the Kennedys had handled it almost effortlessly. They only had to move a few pieces across the board to maintain their dominance. While the situation had rattled them, nothing valuable had shaken loose.

Then Uncle Patrick was killed.

The moment had returned to one that was pleasant enough until the phone rang. Hannibal had just roused from sleep, warm and ravenous from a night of carnage, when the loud electric buzz rattled against the nightstand, disrupting the journey of his hands across Will’s body.

Releasing a frustrated sigh, Will threw an arm out, looked at the screen, then answered it.

2.

“Patrick’s dead!”

“What?”

“Uncle PJ!” Cooper nearly screamed through the receiver, voice hoarse and irate. “He’s dead. They sent him to Pop’s door.”

Will listened, frown line delved between his eye-brows. “Who sent him? Wait. Where are you?”

“I’m at the house. The cops are here. He’s all fucked up.”

“I thought you were in Philly,” Will replied, adding curious concern to his voice.

Cooper stalled for half a second then said in rapid fire, “That doesn’t matter right now. I sent the car. It’ll be there in a half hour.”

Will paused. “Yeah. Yeah, ok. I’ll be over soon,” he said.

“I sent Jeff to ride with you.”

“Cooper. I don’t need a bodyguard—”

“Could you not fucking argue with me for once in your fucking life! Just get in the goddamn car when it arrives.”

Will nodded, about to take the phone from his ear when Cooper blurted out,

“Will! Fuck,” his exhale washed static through the speaker before he said, more calm than before, “Sorry. Ok. I’m sorry. I love you. Just—please.”

“Ok.”

Will dropped the phone from his ear, stunned only by Cooper’s apology. He looked at the black screen for a second, sensing the two spaces of his separate lives converge, and it made him feel a giddy nausea, like he had just huffed gasoline. His eyes cut to the man laying next to him, perched on his elbow, face bright, ready to see what would happen next.

“Is everything alright?” Hannibal asked.

“The delivery arrived,” Will said and set the phone down.

“Splendid,” Hannibal said with twinkling delight. He sprang out of bed and began pulling on his clothes. “It arrived early.”

Will, however, did not share the enthusiasm. He released a deep sigh, right palm rubbing the back of his neck and across his face. “Cooper sent a car. I have to go over there.”

“Is there much upheaval?” Hannibal walked to the windows to draw back the curtains, flooding the room with unabated light.

Will winced. “The cops are there,” he said, eyes adjusting to view the overcast city. “Cooper too.”

Hannibal strode back across the room, feet light and agile, barely making a sound. “Shall I accompany you?” he asked.

Will looked over and found Hannibal standing in the doorway, watching and waiting, sturdy and neat and thoughtful and smiling. It took a second for Will to adjust the aperture of his perception, just as his eyes had adjusted to the light. So much had happened in the past minute and he had to blink a few times. While it wasn’t entirely strange to have Hannibal in his room, it was new, as pleasant as it was awkward.

“It’s fine,” Will replied, finally climbing out of bed and pulling on his joggers.

“I’m more than happy to handle any objection to my presence, should that be your concern.”

“I know.” Will picked up his engagement ring and slid it over his finger. “Still,” he said. “Probably best to go alone.”

There was a pause, long and pregnant and empty, and Will didn’t care for the fixed way Hannibal was staring at him. Words always followed those looks. Words of surmise. Words that emotionally pre-guessed him.

“They won’t know, Will. I can promise you that.”

The words carried themselves low across the walls and floor. As reassuring as they were, they didn’t reach all the corners.

“It won’t take long,” Will said casually as he walked over to meet Hannibal in the doorway. He looked up at the dark man, face soft. “A few hours at most. I won’t spare any details, I promise.”

Hannibal smiled, collected Will’s chin between his index finger and thumb, cradling it, and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“I’ll be here when you return.”

3.

It was nearly quarter to 10am when the car turned into the cobblestone driveway. Any other day there would have been ample space to park, but that day, the driver pulled up to the door to let his passengers out, barely squeezing between a van and police vehicle.

A sullen drizzle speckled the shoulders of Will’s coat as he stepped out of the car. Blue lights reflected in the windows. Radios crackled and bleeped. Uniformed men huddled in groups of two and three murmured low to each other.

A familiar scene.

Cooper and Dean were out front, both haggard in appearance. Cooper looked like he hadn’t been to sleep, clothes disheveled, face unshaven, hair greasy. It was an odd appearance for a man who had just returned from a conference in Philadelphia, but Will didn’t think much of it. Not at the time.

Will walked slowly, trying his best to cope with the fact that he would have to breech the boarders of this unstable man. Days like this, Cooper was a furnace and one step too close

meant suffering the burn that followed. When Cooper caught sight of him, an expression of fright crossed his face, as if Will expected to be stabbed rather than greeted. But it quickly passed when Cooper—not walked, not jogged—ran to Will and scooped him into his arms, nose burrowing into his neck.

“Will,” he whispered, the smell of cedar skin slipping up through grime and dried liquor. “Thank you, Jeff,” he said, not letting go.

“You’re welcome, sir.”

Cooper set Will down, both hands threading through his hair, cradling his face. Sunken back and stained dark, his eyes searched Will’s, sclera tinted pink from tiny bursting veins. “Are you ok?” He asked.

“Cooper,” Will said, reserving a chuckle. “Of course I’m fine. How are things here?”

“Pop’s talking to the detectives now. Mom’s trying to keep the press off the property. They can’t reach his ex-wife or his kids.”

“Patrick’s?”

“Yeah. They’re in Europe, I guess.”

“Where’d they find him?”

Cooper gestured toward a tapped off section of the front walkway, encircled by vehicles to block it from full view.

“Whoever it was killed him off-sight. Sent his chopped up parts in boxes.”

“My god.”

“I know.”

Cooper’s phone rang and he answered it, holding up a finger as he stepping off.

Will took a few steps closer to get a better look.

The scene he had painted on the killing room floor was quite different from the scene in front of him. Will stood there, looking at the cardboard boxes—seams stained dark red, bottoms bloated, pregnant with death—as they were hoisted from the ground and loaded into the evidence van. The last containers of a broken man.

Patrick James Kennedy.

Known to his family as Uncle Patrick and to his friends and PJ, Patrick James Kennedy was an executive for JM Jorden, the largest bank in the United States. With trillions of dollars in total assets, JM Jorden operated on a global scale, its impact seen across economic and political landscapes.

Patrick had his hands in everything, from financing lobbyist for federal campaigns to funding philanthropic outreach for non-profits. Recently, he had been under public scrutiny following the arrest of Ralph Wallen, an international human trafficker and Kennedy's lifelong friend.

For the past year, though the company managed to keep it under wraps, Patrick had been under investigation for allegations that he had enabled Wallen's operations via his position at JM Jorden, processing over $1 billion for Wallen over a twenty year period.

Since the start of the investigation, Patrick Kennedy's life had been in danger. With contacts ranging from politicians to world leaders to religious figures, Patrick's silence was sought by some of the world's most powerful men. His protection from the growing number of threats had been a common topic at the Kennedy dinner table.

Will had taken diligent notes.

Patrick James Kennedy would leave a convenient legacy. His death would be mourned publicly, complete with melancholic headlines, yet behind closed doors, the family knew that nothing about the situation was suspicious. They had mastered the art of maintaining an illusion of shock and devastation, a veneer that concealed the truth—that a rotten fruit had fallen from the family tree.

Hannibal and Will had chosen correctly.

"Will."

Dean approached after finishing with the detectives, loosening his tie in aggressive tugs, and extending his hand

"Dean." Will shook it. "This must be devastating for you."

"It's a real clusterfuck, I'll tell you that much," Dean said, eyeing the scene, hands on his hips.

"Do they know anything?" Will asked, tone just somber enough.

"Fuck-all is what they know."

"I'm sure the investigation will be thorough," Will said, folding his arms.

Dean huffed at that. "They'll trace the currier from the security cameras, maybe question some of the help, and that's where we'll end it. Can't risk letting them go any deeper than that."

Dean didn't need the police to tell him anything. He had his suspicions and he wasn't about to stir the pot to figure out if those suspicions were accurate. He'd call off the dogs before they dug up any dirt.

The plan had been successful.

"Could be serious," Will pressed, testing. "You don't think this might be a threat?"

“Weather I do or not, it’s best to assume someone got the silence they wanted,” Dean said, turning his body toward Will. “And if they’re looking for our silence now then I’m not worried. They’ll have it. Cause if there’s one thing a Kennedy can do, it’s keep their mouth shut,” he finished, dropping a firm hand to Will’s shoulder, shaking it for emphasis. “You understand, don’t you Will?”

Will met his stern gaze and nodded. “Of course.”

“Good. Good,” Dean relaxed, patted him twice, then headed back toward the house.

Cooper stepped back out and passed Dean as he did. He said something to his father in the doorway—hand resting on the crook of his arm—that left his face and mouth as an offering. But the softness was met with force, stopped dead in it tracks. The elevation in Dean’s voice carried a sharp echo, and after slicing a rigid hand through the air, he disappeared inside.

Will watched it infect Cooper, turning his features to resentful stone. He rubbed his eyes and swiped a hand down his face.

He beckoned Will and they went inside.

Through the foyer, past the parlor and library, to the left and into the kitchen.

The sleek room of silver and marble was illuminated only by the white February daylight filtering in through undraped windows.

Carol stood at the counter speaking to her assistant in a hushed tone. “Get Marsha from PR on the phone. Tell her Dean wants a press conference by the end of the day. We have pictures. Exclusives will be given in exchange for appropriate coverage,” then she waved her away, folded her cardigan tight against her body, and took a sip from her glass of white wine.

Will had never realized Carol’s age until that morning. The dim lighting pronounced her gaunt face and thin arms, and for the first time, he noticed her weariness, grooved lines around her mouth, dark circles and puffy bags under her eyes. As she stared into the empty space in front of her, she looked hardly awake, like the motions of her very existence were set on permanent autopilot.

“Mom,” Cooper spoke softly, announcing himself as though he didn’t want to startle her. He walked over and kissed her cheek.

She swallowed once—a thick, sticky swallow that forced down an eternity of stifled screams—and collected herself.

“I spoke to Donna on the phone,” she said, moving into the topic without a gap. “She’ll speak to James about addressing this in The Times. Call him this afternoon, will you, and remind him that you’ll be sending a legal team to help.”

“Sure,” Cooper said, gently holding her small arm. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” She folded her arms, looking off and blinking rapidly. “For now it seems we’re on solid footing.”

“You don’t have to do all this, Mom.” Cooper collected her elbows to turn her toward him. “Sarah and Marsha can handle it,” he said, trying to pull her into a hug.

But she sent her arms up and pushed his hands away. “Cooper, please! Stop this constant neediness. I can’t take another minute of it!” She stepped back, blinking rapidly, placing a shaky hand on her collar like she was trying to fiddle with a neckless that wasn’t there. “Now, please,” she said, calmer than before. “Go find your father and help him clean up this mess.”

Cooper stood for a second, chin drawn up, cutting his eyes in frustration, then stormed out.

Will spared a glance back at Carol before following Cooper out.

Cooper burst into the library, striding in fast and hard. Will stepped inside and closed the door quietly behind him.

Shucking his coat from his shoulders and tossing it to the nearest chair, Cooper went to the liquor cart. He poured a helping of brown liquor and drank. Then poured more and drank. He poured more and re-stoppered the decanter. He took a deep, weary breath and sighed as he sank to the back of the tufted leather sofa.

Will slid his hands into his pockets, solemn. He took careful steps, one at a time, and came to rest next to his fiancé.

Cooper downed the rest of the liquid and just as he went to chuck the glass at the wall, Will stopped him. He gently took the intended projectile from Cooper, set it aside, and replace it with his own hand.

Will didn’t know what he was doing, but whatever it was, it seemed like enough. Cooper looked down at him with feint surprise, feint remembrance, a flicker of something genuine in his eyes. He gripped Will’s fingers and relaxed as he released another sigh.

They sat for a second. Waiting.

“You’ll stay here, with me, tonight," Cooper finally said.

“Your father seems to think there isn’t any real danger,” Will replied, both trying to reassure him and trying to avoid a stay in the Kennedy mansion.

“There’s no way of knowing that,” Cooper retorted, quite tersely at first, then more affectionate. “And I’d just like you to stay,” he looked at Will again. “Just tonight.”

A smile tugged at the corner of Will’s mouth. “Alright.”

Cooper met the expression with a large, appreciative smile.

“You know, I remember reading that article—the one with all that stuff about you being a killer.”

Will swallowed, taking a beat of his heart to respond.

“The tabloid article?”

“Yeah,” Cooper’s affectionate expression remained. “I read that and I remember thinking to myself ‘*man. what a fucked up guy*,’” he laughed softly.

Will smiled. “You like fucked up guys, Cooper. That’s your type.”

“No I don’t,” Cooper said, still sweet but also sincere. “I *really* don’t. I don’t think that article was right about you.”

“I’m sure whatever it said is the least of what I deserve,” Will said, readjusting his feet.

“Why?" Cooper replied, looking at him, dead serious. "Cause you are a cold-blooded killer? Hardened criminal? Serial murderer?”

“That’s exactly why.”

“Will,” Cooper said, shaking his head lightly. “I don’t think that’s true. I don’t think you are what they say you are. Whoever Hannibal has convinced you you are, I think he’s dead wrong.” He reached over a tucked a stray curl behind Will’s ear. “I think you're wonderful.”

Will met his gaze, eyes shifting back and forth, searching for sincerity, as surprised as he was relieved when he found it.

“You’re different today,” he said, almost whispering.

Cooper searched him similarly, and Will wasn’t sure what he found. “So are you,” he replied.

It was interesting to Will in that moment that he discovered an empathetic connection to Cooper, the Cooper that he saw there, in the slivers of space where a kinder man seemed plausible to exist. For whatever reason, Will found he was unable to leave that man unaddressed—that some part of him owed that Cooper his sympathy.

“I’m sorry, Cooper. I hate this, for you, for your family," Will said.

“It’ll blow over. It always blows over,” Cooper responded, more cheerful than before. “We got the wedding coming up and that’ll settle things. We’ll get married and take a six-week honeymoon. What you think? Somewhere in the woods like you like?”

“I’d like that,” Will smiled.

Cooper leaned in, face hovering over Will’s. “Just you and me, forever. Right?”

“Yes,” Will uttered back.

What was it about these moments? Will thought.

Cooper kissed him and when he did, Will kissed him back. When Cooper kissed him deeper, with more passion, Will leaned into it. He wrapped his arms around him, let his large hands

slide across his body, let his body press against his. When Will's legs slid up between Cooper's, discovering he had an erection, Will reached down and held it. When Cooper gasped quietly into Will's open mouth, Will felt an overwhelming sense of pride.

"Will, baby," Cooper whispered, his voice sounding so soft. "I missed you so fucking much."

"Did you?" Will teased in short strokes, the length expanding under his touch.

Cooper's hands dug into him—desperate. "I'm sorry," he uttered as he caressed Will's face. "I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" Will demanded.

"For not holding you like this, for not seeing you, for staying away so long."

"How sorry?"

"So sorry." Cooper growled in such a subservient way, so sincerely—putty in Will's hands.

Will went for Cooper's belt, unlatching it, tugging at his fly. Cooper responded in kind, throwing off his blazer, sending Will's jacket from his shoulders, undoing his pants. Cooper forced him to the bookcase. Will shimmied his pants down just far enough. Cooper sent a gob of spit to his cockhead. Will spread himself, allowing Cooper to gain access.

It hurt. It always hurt, even when it didn't.

Cooper thrust up into him, pounding with hard, abrupt jerks, suppressing his deep grunts with each one.

"Ahgod, Will," he huffed quietly, lips teasing at Will's ear. "My pretty Will."

Will reached back for a handful of hair, "Cooper," he spoke into Cooper's mouth before kissing it.

"God, I love you, Will. I love you so fucking much."

"How much?" Will demanded once again.

"So much it makes my heart ache."

The words felt so good.

So fucking good.

When Will moaned a little too loud, Cooper reached around and gently put a hand over his mouth.

"Shhh, baby. Stay quiet while I put my cum inside you."

Cooper clamped down on him, held him close and tight and hard, and thrust deep and fast and painful a half dozen more times before his body seized against Will, breath stammering,

pumping shallow until he emptied. He stopped, hold going lax, huffing silently into Will's hair, and pulled his large cock out, leaving an empty soreness behind. He kissed Will's neck, stepped away, and stuffed himself back into his slacks.

Will pulled his jeans back up and fixed his shirt.

Cooper sent a hand through his unwashed hair and pecked Will once on the mouth.

"I'm gonna go help Pop."

And just like that, Cooper was gone again.

Will leaned against the leather couch.

It was always strange—the separation.

Even in the silence, only seconds after leaving the room, it felt like Cooper was still there. Could still see him. Could still hear him. Was watching and listening to every movement or thought.

Sometimes Will would hear Cooper's voice in his head as clear as his own thoughts, and often enough, it made him feel guilty for simply existing. Sometimes he could hear the conversation that would follow getting caught, what Cooper would say or do if this escape plan failed.

Cooper was a part of every hypothetical.

Will had been surrounded by Cooper so long, both mentally and physically—his shallow words, the repetitive threats, the forced superiority—that his presence had become more like a chronic ache, something he had to forcibly forget about. He didn't want to think about it because just living it was difficult enough, already an overwhelming amount to contend with.

Fucking exhausting.

The worst thing, Will was discovering, was that he couldn't stop thinking about it even when he actively tried to. His mind kept trying to banish it like a child wishing away a monster in the closet.

He didn't want to think about it because whenever he did, unpleasant images intervened—peach snap dragons, first flirtations, sharp cocktails, bloodied lips, Cooper's large, unwelcome body—and his heart would start to beat too fast, partly in anxiety, but mostly in shame.

He heard the ringing in his ears after being beaten to the floor. He saw himself accepting yet another apology by dropping to his knees and putting his lips around Cooper's cock. He tasted the day old musk, flesh like perfumed sweat, felt the hand tugging his hair too harshly, heard the commands to look up, and despite all these things, Will would swallow anyway, never hesitating a bit.

He let Cooper force him against the walls of his life, accepting every villainous thing sent down inside him.

Physical apology after physical apology.

For so long, the sweetest most endearing version of Cooper had been connected to this type of passionate physical intimacy, that the inclination, the innate response, was that Will owed it to Cooper to reciprocate.

And he hated himself for it.

Will would never tell anyone about what happened in the library that day, and he supposed it was best to lie about it to himself, though he never would truly succeed. Guilt and shame had value, of course, and while he knew how those things motivated his behavior now, they were pointless to reflect on. It was an unconscious effort to distance himself from the impact Cooper had on his present life.

He sought a sense of detachment, hoping that by dissociating from the memories, he could escape their influence. In that way, his identity was separate from his experience, as if by compartmentalizing it, he could eventually discard it entirely. The once-familiar numbness now revealed itself as a self-imposed shield, a mechanism to block out the pain.

Then there were times like this.

He would sit or lay beside Cooper when he was like this and it almost did't matter. If he accepted it, it somehow made it easier. Like the proximity erased the past, or at the very least, blocked it out. The physical Cooper was protecting Will from the mental Cooper, the Cooper of his memories and thoughts, the Cooper of his fears and anxieties.

Cooper was the danger. Cooper was the safety. Cooper was a circle, the start and the finish, the loop by which Will navigated his entire life.

So he stayed that night inside the Kennedy Estate, making an apology that he didn't even mean.

4.

Hannibal fixed breakfast the next morning—sausage, tomatoes, and sourdough. He had no definitive way of knowing, but it was easy enough to deduce the behavior that might follow. Will had not returned the previous day, as promised. Instead, he had chosen to stay with Cooper Kennedy, yet again.

Hannibal knew.

The front door opened, but the man didn't have to step inside the apartment for Hannibal to smell the stench pouring out of him, more of a liquid than a vapor, thick and viscous, spilling all around him. He had showered, true enough, but to Hannibal, the touch of another man would always stick inside Will's pores like caked stage make-up, never fully leaving even when properly cleaned.

It was the mask Will wore so well, often enough, Hannibal couldn't tell the real man from the player.

Will entered the kitchen, slow—the somber foot falls of a guilty man.

Hannibal didn't look back over his shoulder. He continued his tasks, silent, thinking.

How would the young man ask for forgiveness this time? Would he ask for forgiveness at all? Should this be yet another event they swept under the rug, attributing its purpose to *the manipulation of Cooper Kennedy?* Would Will try justify it by reiterating his ultimate goal of their union?

Insulting.

When Will sat down to start his coffee, he lit a cigarette and took the saucer as an ashtray. Hannibal finally flashed him a disapproving look but said nothing. He slid the frying pan from one eye to the other, wiped his fingers on his apron, and snatched the cigarette from Will's hand. He snuffed it out in three aggressive taps and took the ash laden saucer to the sink.

The young man would never cease to test Hannibal's patience.

He retrieved a new saucer from the cupboard and slid it next to Will's place setting, maintaining purposeful eye contact through a soft but narrow gaze.

"Glad to see you've returned," he said, taking a spatula to distribute food to plate. "What brought you?"

"Hannibal," Will said with a sigh, slightly dropping his head. "I left as soon as I could."

Hannibal set down Will's freshly prepared plate of favorites, letting the edge of dish thump a little too hard against the table.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Hannibal continued. "Or was it another unfulfilled evening?"

Will cracked his knuckles, eyeing the fire escape.

"Unfulfilled, I take it. How very frustrated you must be," Hannibal sat down, unfolding his napkin and laying it on his lap. "How are the in-laws?"

"They're distraught," Will replied, not looking at him. "That should please you."

“Send my regards to the family.”

Will blinked once as he cut his eyes to Hannibal, blinking again as he looked back out the window. “They’re not my family, Hannibal.”

“I’d venture to argue otherwise,” Hannibal said, decorating his fork. “A legacy befitting its newest member.”

Will still refused eye contact as he took a hard swallow of the dark black liquid. “I’m nothing like the Kennedys,” he replied, very sure of himself.

“Are you not?” Hannibal said, collecting another bite into his mouth.

“I wear the Kennedy scars,” Will said, still certain the words leaving his lips had any amount of conviction. “I don’t inflict the Kennedy wounds.”

“I dare say you do both,” Hannibal replied, simple, sharp.

Will chuffed, coffee sloshing as it was returned to the saucer. “That’s rich coming from you.”

Hannibal schooled his annoyance and placed his fork and knife on either side of his plate, demurely interacting his fingers. He would not take much more of this. “I have my fair share of scars just as I’ve inflicted my fair share of wounds,” he replied. “I’ve never argued the contrary.”

“Then what exactly are you getting at?”

Will was clearly fed up with the ploy, which meant he’d be far more candid, and taking this cue, Hannibal further directed his point.

“You’ve assigned a spectrum of atrocity to your scars—both given and received—ranging from minor to heinous. It is this very evaluation that keeps you in a state of constant flux, sending you from one world to the other, and I would venture to say, why you continue to return to my door.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “That *evaluation* is why we’re in this situation to start with.”

“How do you mean?”

“I was angry at you,” Will said. “I felt like I had every right to be.”

“You find comfort in your anger.”

“Direction,” Will replied firmly. “It gives me direction.”

Hannibal took another swallow, finding Will’s eye contact and maintaining it. “Was it that same anger that drove you to Cooper Kennedy to start with? Furthermore, do you feel that anger directed you down the *right* path?”

Will narrowed his eyes…again. “There was more to it than that. I didn’t pick Cooper simply because I was mad at you.”

“Is that so?” Hannibal replied, a slight sneer across his lips. “Please elaborate, then. What else drove you to Cooper? What spurred the initial attraction?”

“Psh,” Will scoffed. “You look at him and tell me.”

Hannibal leered at him, finding the objective statement of his subjective preferences to be insulting.

“Was that the only reason? You chose him because you desired him sexually?”

“Sure,” Will replied, almost dismissively, skating up to the edge to the of a lie but not quite making it over. “He was charming,” he continued, treading lightly at first, gaining confidence with each word. “Handsome, successful, educated, hailing from a wealthy family—he seemed like everything I was supposed to want at a time when you weren’t enough.”

The words kicked up several sensations then settled like dust. Hannibal reserved his inflection, pressing only into the edge of each consonance to lure Will into further honesty.

“And when it transitioned into a relationship, were you aware of how that perception might change?”

Will sighed, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms. Something far more honest came out of Will, something Hannibal had not quite expected.

“I think about those first few weeks, how sweet and sincere he could be in those early days. I ask myself if I knew, if there were signs I ignored or allowed. And maybe there were. I remember when he found out—about us, about our criminal past— he made it seem like it was secret he’d keep safe and that if something happened, he’d protect me. He told me it didn’t change how he felt.”

“Are you in love with him?”

Will hesitated, his eyes retreating into themselves only to return moments later with an answer. “There was affection. I cared for him. Maybe it was sincere.”

Perhaps Will was offering himself with sincerity, but Hannibal was not about to take that lying down. He could see it in his eyes, read it in the curve of his posture, hear it in the tone of his words. Will had never sharpened the piece of him into a blade that cut crisp lines between expected feeling and true feeling, and because of it, he continued to retreat as a child would retreat from the darkness, wielding the blunt weapon, bludgeoning and beating the people around him every time he experienced either.

“The perfect man for you,” Hannibal said, firm, a hint of smarmy lacing his candor. “You chose a man with a hidden darkness that matched your own. You felt safe with him, identically masking who you truly are. You were drawn to him, knowing it would end in violence, because violence is what you know.“

Will shook his head, huffing. “I chose this, then. I wanted it, right? Just another casualty on the trail of broken lives Cooper Kennedy leaves behind.”

Hannibal kept his sharp gaze, piercing deeply. “Is that what you believe? That your life is broken?”

Will said nothing. Simply nodded.

“And yet you continue to allow your attachment to him dictate your decisions,” Hannibal continued.

“It’s not easy to let go of that,” Will replied, a dash of anger lacing his words.

“Of what?”

“My life with Cooper. Two years is a long time to live inside something.”

“Certainly long enough to make an atrocity feel like a normalcy,” Hannibal added, smug.

“You are right about that,” Will volleyed back, returning the smugness with added sarcasm.

They stared at each other for a moment that perhaps lasted longer than the years they had known each other. They were both angry, annoyed, the things they were experiencing grating against the underside of their soft flesh like sandpaper. They were tired of this, tired of these arguments, tired of the denial and tired of refuting that denial.

Hannibal could see something, something deeper, a truth that drew blood, so he spoke to it, slicing with honesty, despite how it might hurt the man he loved.

“Tell me, Will. Do you believe that the decisions you are making now are influenced by the abuse you have endured, rather than choices made of your own volition?”

Will looked him, eyes flitting back and forth, then turned to the window as he spoke, “I feel like I’m suffocating,” he said softly, still bitter. “So much of this city feels small to me now. I’ve grown accustomed to who I am with Cooper, who I am here. I don’t know who I’ll become without him, outside this space. It’s hard to believe that any life we,” he looked at Hannibal, “you and I, build outside this won’t unravel under the truth.”

Hannibal narrowed his eyes this time. “To what are you referring?”

“Who we are together,” Will replied, shoulders raised, hands cutting through the air.

“And what kind of life is it if you continue to live in fear?”

“A simple one,” Will asserted.

“Simplicity does not guarantee safety,” Hannibal replied.

“Neither does chaos.”

And without allowing it space, the monster boiled up in Hannibal's chest and spoke for him, "You're mourning the loss of a life that remains elusive to you, a life you won't allow yourself to live out. You cling to what you know because you're anticipating a negative outcome while blaming me for your apprehension of that outcome."

Will's face drained of blood, pupils constricting. The words struck a cord deep inside him, and Hannibal could see it reverberate to his core.

"I'm not mourning anything. This isn't about my feelings for Cooper, its about you and me. I am not insecure or uncertain about what I'm doing. I know who I am and I know what I'm doing."

"Is that a lie for me or for yourself?

"I don't have to explain myself to you."

"No you don't," Hannibal said, returning the severity. "But it's easier to refute what I say when you can project your insecurities onto me."

"I've had enough of this. If you don't like how I'm handling this, if things aren't moving fast enough for you, maybe you should take care of it yourself."

Hannibal's expression remained neutral, about to deal the last word, but Will had already left the room, nearly stomping his way to the fire escape.

5.

The execution of the first Kennedy victim had gone splendidly. Patrick James Kennedy was dead without the slightest of suspicion laid at Will or Hannibal's feet. Assessing the severity of the Kennedy's reach, the methods and contacts used to control others' lives, were showing themselves. They now had the Kennedy web in clear view, and while it reached far and deep, Hannibal knew that all mazes were solvable and he had, on numerous occasions, managed to escape ones of similar complexity.

They were approaching the end, and every step closer, Will slowed in fear.

There, sitting in the kitchen where they had hidden and shared the deepest of secrets, Hannibal contemplated Will Graham and his enigmatic nature, both bewildering and beautiful. Will was like a phantom in the forest, sensed through sound but never fully revealed. Sometimes he was elusive, caught in the transitional spaces between rooms, and at other times, he was fully visible, baring his truest nature in the sanctuary of their rooms.

He turned his head toward the fire escape, viewing through a sliver of window, the young man leaned against the railing, his shoulders and back undulating under the morning light.

As he watched Will smoke, Hannibal couldn't help but feel a sense of admiration for the man's strength and resilience. Despite the scars that marred his body and the trauma that had unfolded in his past, Will still managed to remain standing, if only just. There was a fire within him, a ferocity that burned bright and refused to be extinguished. It was that very fire that Hannibal hoped to stoke.

Hannibal let his gaze sweep over the sprawling city beyond the windows and found himself questioning if this was the right place for Will. He pondered whether he had inadvertently chained Will to a realm that stifled his true potential—an existence confined within the glass jar of their shared life.

Perhaps there was a place for Will where he could express himself fully, effortlessly, with the simple grace he found in that apartment. The thought flickered through Hannibal's mind, beckoning him to consider the possibility of taking Will away, of finding a haven for him to blossom. Perhaps, in their journey to condemn Cooper Kennedy, they should find their way there.

Home. Perhaps Hannibal should take Will home.

ENDEMISM PART I

Cicadas emerge in intervals of 13 to 17 years. Evolution synchronized their emergence to produce overwhelming numbers so that any known prey would satiate their hunger before feasting on enough of the population to threaten the survival of the species. They are known for their high level of endemism, only emerging to sing their unique and classifying song in habitats that foster their growth.

At 120 decibels, cicadas' songs are the loudest in the animal kingdom, deafening to those who get to close. In the Chinese essay "Thirty-Six Stratagems", the phrase "to shed the golden cicada skin" is the poetic name for using a decoy to fool one's enemies into drinking the poisonous melody that's benign only to others of its kind.

1.

Hannibal sent his hand under the handle of his vintage Chanel carryon and hoisted into the overhead compartment. He repeated the process, adding Gustav's bag beside it, then snapped the door shut. They sat down in their elegantly laid out first class seats, Hannibal eyeing the couple across the isle just once.

Cooper sat at the window, his large hand draped over Will's thigh as the young man ordered a drink. Sitting there, engaging with both each other and the world around them with such casual intimacy, any other person might have mistaken them for a happy couple.

Though he knew better, Hannibal himself was almost convinced, and he found it made him seethe with dark anticipation.

This trip could not come soon enough. Hannibal had spent the past two months in tedious preparations.

Tedious to say the least.

Spring was quickly escalating into summer, rewarming the cold bluntness of the city. Grey icy skies were replaced by pale blue ones, often speckled with wispy white cloud. Even the flight that day would be unabated by any inclement weather.

The next stage of their plan had come due, and if Hannibal hoped for any level of success, playing nice with Cooper Kennedy had been inevitable. However, making amends with Cooper was not something he wanted to do, and Hannibal had spent almost every day prior contemplating every other option.

Though the engagement had been his idea, Hannibal loathed every second that gaudy yellow ring adorned Will's finger. He despised the way the entire family paraded Will around as if he already carried the Kennedy name, which in Hannibal's mind, was an over exaggeration of importance.

Will's attachment to that life, no matter how small, was an irritant, one that had been the catalyst for this trip to Louisiana.

"*Maybe you should take care of it yourself*," as Will had so *politely* stated.

The week following their conversation in the kitchen that morning, post Cooper's tarnishing of his young beloved, Hannibal made the decision to take matters into his own hands.

When Hannibal purchased a coastal cottage in Will's hometown as an engagement present, he offered it to the happy couple over dinner at Glenaried's. He explained that he had coordinated an extended weekend getaway and, as an act of good faith, said that he and Gus would host the trip, taking care of every detail, and provide a tour of the area that would eventually be the Kennedy's retreat from city life.

Cooper had been receptive in public.

Cooper had been perturbed in private.

He heard the conversation from the hallway later that evening, when he bickered back and forth with Will about the intentions of such a gift.

"He's showing off," Cooper had complained, pacing around and flailing his large hands like a petulant child.

Will had played his part expertly.

"I can't argue with you on that," Will chuckled to himself, "but we should at least try to make an effort."

The insertion of *we* seemed to do the trick, and despite knowing that the word was meant as a manipulative tactic, Hannibal hated hearing the two of them lumped into a singular sum.

Cooper agreed, but of course, he had added that, "nothing's changed, Will. You get me? It could all go up in flames if he's feeling like fucking me over."

"Coop," Will had said in an almost inaudible whisper. "It's not like that. Not anymore. Hannibal and I aren't partners in crime. You and I are."

Will deserved an Oscar for his performance.

Cooper still believed Will was his subservient boy, beaten and trained. He still thought Will had no real thoughts of his own.

A benefit.

And now the four men sat as the plane took flight, ascending the sky to take them toward the deep world that raised Will Graham.

Hannibal glanced over once more to find Will and Cooper exchanging a brief kiss—the easily shared affection.

How *perfect* it all seemed.

But as Hemingway once wrote:

"Never go on trips with anyone you do not love."

2.

The trip down south was the slow process of evading light, the small dots of headlights, street lamps, and house windows dissipated as the group approached more rural parts of the country. The pumping veins of human activity stretched until the gaps between each cell grew wide, leaving space for wildlife to take over.

The further they drove from the airport, the thicker and more oppressive the flora and fauna became, bearing down on the structured hierarchy of the world.

Hannibal was lost in thought, navigating the steering wheel of their rental car as Gustav continued to ramble endlessly about his familiarity with similar areas—the well traveled man. Every once in a while, Hannibal spared a glance through the rearview mirror to the backseat, looking for Will's eye-contact, instead finding the young man tucked under Cooper's arm, their dangling hands interlaced, gaze cast out the window.

How convincing, Hannibal thought.

Uncertainty was more than a rarity for Hannibal Lecter. More like a passing fancy—something he imagined was unpleasant. But seeing Will and Cooper acting out the play that was their engagement, Hannibal could easily admit the sensation he felt was something akin to fear.

Hannibal would often observe, irritatedly, these moments, convinced they were full of meaning, that perhaps the two men were conducting an extracurricular relationship that Will was purposefully excluding him from.

Each day, his love for Will Graham grew stronger, and while he had the capacity to maintain appearances, Hannibal was well aware of the vulnerability such emotions fostered. He could not, at that moment, fathom what would happen to him should this sinister plan fail.

Will had proven, time and time again, his ability to deceive, which Hannibal appreciated as it continued to benefit their future goals. And while that theory remained at the forefront of

Hannibal's mind, he could not ignore the fact that it was equally plausible that the inverse were true—that Will was the deceiver and Hannibal, not Cooper, was the deceived.

Hannibal's grip tightened on the steering wheel, refusing himself another glance into the back seat.

For the next four days, he would have to put his faith in Will, as well as his knowledge of Will that had culminated over their past years together, and trust that this trip would end as he planned.

As they turned onto another seemingly endless road, Hannibal's thoughts were interrupted by Gustav's insistence on a pit stop. Hannibal had no desire to break before they reached the cottage, preferring to avoid any public restroom, but ultimately relinquished when the two back seat passengers insisted as well.

"Just pull off here," Will said, his southern drawl already showing itself, and Hannibal sighed with a softness and pulled into the faded parking lot.

The gas station stood like a forgotten relic. It's once-vibrant green and orange paint had surrendered to the relentless sun, now peeling away like dead skin. Rusty and crooked, only two of the pumps were in working order, the others sitting silently as they bore witness to decades of neglect.

Gustav hopped out first, somewhat desperately, before the car had even stopped. Cooper and Will had mutually decided to get out as well to stretch their legs, and they filed out, their hands still entwined as they walked into the mini mart.

Brooding, mainly because he did not want to go inside but now feeling he had to, Hannibal immediately followed.

Stepping out of the cool car, the heat latched onto Hannibal with clamping force, sucking every ounce of moisture out of his skin, drawing sweat from the pores without their permission.

The buzz of cicadas singing in the distance echoed behind the loud sizzle of a flickering neon sign indicating that there was, indeed, life inside the abandoned looking building.

Hannibal drew back the door, a bell dinging as he entered. He slid his tortoise shell sunglasses off his angular nose, folding them to rest at the against the buttons of his white linen shirt.

Hannibal Lecter had never been in a 7-Eleven before.

It was a quick mart, of sorts, dimly lit by humming fluorescent lights. Over the intercom, radio music played, barely audible beneath the whirring of the overworked freezers and beneath it all, the smell of lysol covered the stench of bodily fluids and stale cigarettes.

An interesting place.

Hannibal strode down one isle that offered an assortment of snack items including sunflower seeds that required one to manually discard the shells via one's mouth. He only knew this because it had been the first thing Will grabbed, ripping the bag open and pouring himself a mouthful.

They would discuss that habit later.

He scanned the drink coolers along the back wall, then came upon an isle of shelves that housed large ball jars containing food items swimming in what appeared to be a beet brine. He stopped for a moment, picking one up and examining it.

"You serving those with dinner tonight?" Will asked as he walked down the same isle, sending a seed shell from his mouth into a styrofoam cup, a half smile across his face.

"What is it?" Hannibal asked, returning the jar to its resting place.

Will looked at him, brow raised. "Seriously? You don't know what this is?" He asked, pointing to the ball jar of pickled eggs.

Hannibal just stared, blankly.

"What about these?" Will asked, pointing to a jar of pickled pigs' feet.

"That's pickled pigs' feet," Cooper said, coming up behind Will like a shadow, mouth crunching a pretzel, always less than a step behind. Cooper looked over at Hannibal with a smug smile, chewing far too loudly.

Will looked up at him. "How did you know that?" he asked, appearing aggravatingly charmed.

"I love you—so I love where you're from. And—everyone knows that," Cooper replied, kissing Will on the cheek, popping another pretzel in his mouth and walking off. As he brushed pass Hannibal with a wink, he patted him twice, much too hard, on the shoulder.

It was evident they were eggs and pig's feet. Hannibal's question was intended to learn the full of knowledge of this obscure local delicacy and not just the contents. However, it was also evident Cooper felt his purpose for this trip was to prove his superiority to Hannibal, as both roommate and friend, starting with this little show.

This trip would, perhaps, take more restraint than Hannibal had originally predicted.

3.

They pulled into the cottage's long, overgrown gravel driveway, following slowly until it opened on their destination.

The sight was like something out of a novel, a southern gothic tragedy filled with haunted charm.

Though modest, the pale peach Acadian cottage sat near the waterfront, encompassed by acres of wild property, propped up by white pillars and a wrap-around porch. Ancient oaks with gnarled branches reached out over the single story home, Spanish moss adorning the tops like tinsel.

Across from the property, the glassy water of a large lake snaked its way through bald cypress, leading out into the edge of nowhere.

It was extravagant only in its romantic setting, a tribute of sorts, to what should have been Will's childhood home.

Hannibal could imagine the young man running barefoot across the sharp grass, fishing rod in tow, eagerly seeking the morning's catch. That boy, whoever he might have been, was the boy Hannibal wished to seek now—innocent in his purest nature, unafraid of the fearsome landscape that surrounded him.

They parked and stepped out of the car.

The air was thick with the pungent scent of the bayou, sand and silt, a heady mixture of damp earth and brackish water.

As everyone unloaded their bags and items, Will took a moment. He walked to hillside overlooking the lake and stood, blue eyes shifting across the water as Hannibal came to stand beside him.

"Hannibal," Will said softly, maintaining a joyful gaze despite his somewhat stoic expression. "You've outdone yourself."

Hannibal looked over at Will, the sunlight reflecting brightly in his eyes. The dense heat pulled blood into Will's pale cheeks, flushing them in rosy pink. He looked beautiful, unbothered by the climate despite how it was shifting every cell inside him.

Will Graham was resilient, born into a harsh environment he grew a hard shell that allowed the continued metamorphosis inside. Because of this unforgiving place, Will was able to thrive where most would perish. A phenomenal creature—one worthy of the protection offered by the world.

Compelled to touch him, to perhaps embrace the young man as he experienced that rising elation of peace, Hannibal remembered who they were in that moment together—just roommates—and offered instead, as if it were a secret, "I'd give you this wretched earth, Will."

Will glanced over for less than a second, mouth quirking up into a barely noticeable smile, "I know," he said, then returned to the farce and walked back to Cooper. "What you think, Coop? Nice huh?"

“It’s uh…” Cooper looked at the small house, not taking in the landscape whatsoever and stated plainly, “…it’s charming, Lecter.”

Charming.

Such an expression, as if Cooper’s approval held any weight at all. Hannibal said nothing. He retrieved the keys from his pocket and made his way to the front stoop, stopping abruptly.

Gus walked up behind him. “Han, you can’t just stop,” then he too, stopped suddenly.

It was so uncommon for Hannibal to experience such a state. He was tense apart from the deep inhales of his chest. Will could see the muscles in his jaw working as he tried to maintain his composure.

“Um, what’s happening?” Will asked, looking at both stunned men with confusion.

“There’s a snake,” Hannibal replied.

Will walked over to see. Sure enough, there, at the foot of the doorframe, a rust orange cottonmouth was coiling itself to strike.

“No one move,” Hannibal said assertively, as if he were about to handle the situation in his nearly paralyzed state.

“Hannibal…are you serious?” Will said, looking over at him with a raised brow. “Snakes? Out of everything…snakes?”

“It’s a perfectly rational fear, Will.”

“Oh man,” Will huffed with a smile, shaking his head and walking off as the two men stood silent as the grave. He went to the trunk of the car, retrieved one of the hunting rifles. He loaded two shells into the chamber as he walked back to the porch. “Move,” he said, stern, commanding, almost aggressive.

Hannibal and Gustav both took one giant step to the side.

And without hesitation, Will wracked the gun and fired.

The snake split into two pieces, sending bits of flesh flying, leaving an explosive blood stain behind. Will stepped forward, grabbed the headless body and tossed it over the railing, wiping his bloodied hand on his jeans.

Mouth agape, eyes unblinking, breath stalled, Hannibal was certain he had been more aroused in his life, but he could remember when.
Will looked at him and chuckled, “You alright?”

”Yes,” Hannibal replied, both flustered and amazed at Will’s ruthlessness. “Thank you.”

Will shrugged. “No problem.”

They maintained eye contact until Cooper came in. “You’re lethal with that thing, baby!” He said, kissing Will hard.

Gustav, of course, came to check on Hannibal. “You alright, my darling?”

“Of course.”

Gustav offered his own kiss to Hannibal, but somehow he knew that it was nothing like the kiss of the snake killer.

4.

As mid-afternoon approached, Cooper felt the need to finish a few work calls. Will, however, felt the need to explore his old stomping grounds. Hannibal suggested they go for a swim and when asked if he’d like to join them, Gustav declined by informing them both that he thought it was disgusting to swim in murky water and he would rather take a nap.

Silently understanding these opportunities would be rare over the course of the next four days, neither man protested the lack of company.

They changed and walked the winding dirt path that lead to the lake. A rickety pier jutted out into the water, its varnish had all but peeled away. The warped board creaked underfoot as Will dropped his towel—and to Hannibal's surprise, his shorts—and jumped in.

Hannibal smiled and followed suit.

The cool water enveloped Hannibal's body, taking the heat from his skin, washing away the sweat of the day.

As they swam, Hannibal couldn't help but admire how Will’s lithe body moved through the water with ease, his muscles flexing and relaxing with every stroke. He was graceful, executing a muscle memory he surely had forgotten about.

He dove under the dark water, and when popped back up, the widest and brightest smile stretched across his face. It was so glorious yet held so much mystery, something unnamed. It was the same mirth Hannibal had seen in him not long ago, after they nearly plummeted to their deaths in the elevator.

Was it bliss? Is that why is was so unrecognizable?

Hannibal mirrored the expression, trying to draw Will into full expression. “Are you happy here?” He asked.

Will maintained his smile, treading through the water with ease, and nodded his head.

They circled each other for a moment, and Hannibal thought perhaps they'd approach each other when Will suddenly dove under the water again, disappearing for a few seconds before resurfacing.

"I found something," Will said, grinning. "Come here."

Hannibal looked at him, curious. He hesitated for a moment, unsure, but something about the way Will looked at him, with those bright blue eyes sparkling with mischief, drew him into the moment.

Hannibal swam over, and waited, looking down at the water's surface as Will drew his hands up. Without warning, Will slung one arm around his neck and smeared a handful of dark silt across Hannibal's face.

He smiled wide, backing away slowly, "It's good for your pores."

Hannibal blew the mud from his lips and sank his face into the water. He returned, shaking his head like a dog, large drops of water leaving his greying fringe. Then, with a sinister delight, he made his way over to Will, who swam as quickly as he could.

"No!" He laughed as he tried to escape.

With a wide smile that bore his sharp teeth, Hannibal grabbed the young man, using his body weight to pull them both below the surface.

As they resurfaced—Will's arms around Hannibal's shoulders, legs around his waist, his laughter echoing off the trees, the sound of it sweet and pure—Hannibal felt a warmth in his chest that he couldn't explain.

They were there, alone, hidden under the shadow of the dock.

"I missed you," Will whispered.

The moment Hannibal had waited for.

He smiled again, reaching his face up to invite a kiss. Will responded eagerly, his hands reaching up to tangle in Hannibal's hair. They savored the taste of each other, lips coated in a brine, heart filled with passion, seemingly unafraid of the consequences that might follow.

This bold young man was the Will Graham that Hannibal wanted. He arrived there, safe, but it was only a glimpse. Forever was he flickering in and out of his truest self.

They swam for a while longer then climbed out. Will sat down and propped up on his arms and Hannibal draped his head on Will's shin, and there, together, they talked quietly, bodies drying in the sun.

Hannibal looked out across the water, shimmering golden in the mid-day son, then up at Will, glistening with a similar radiance. He brought his hand up to Will's stomach and traced his

fingers across the reflective scar.

Will hummed, quickly grabbing the fingers and kissing them before handing them back to Hannibal.

“We should have chosen Louisiana,” Hannibal started, contemplative.

“For what?”

“For escape.”

“Instead of New York?” Will asked.

“Yes.”

“Ah. Well…” Will smiled down at Hannibal, running his fingers through his hair. “Hindsight is 20/20,” he said.

”This could have been our home,” Hannibal said. “It could have been you and I getting married and not you and Cooper,” Hannibal stated, almost as if this was an extension of a previous conversation.

Will dropped his hand back. “Mm,” he hummed, brushing off the topic, leaning his face back to bask in the sun.

“Tell me. For this wedding of yours—”

Will groaned, “Oh lord. What about it?”

Hannibal peered up with a smug grin, one eye pinched closed against the sun. “Do you plan on wearing a gown?”

Will looked down with narrowed eyes and smirked, “Oh yeah. A beautiful fucking gown.”

“The spectacle of the century?” Hannibal jested.

“I already told you. The prettiest bride you ever saw, you smug fuck.”

“I understand the desire to avoid sincerity, Will,” Hannibal said, more somber than before, “but if I am to be honest, I believe that would be the truth, no matter your attire.”

There was an inexplicable silence they shared, one Hannibal did not enjoy at all.

Will sat up, pushing Hannibal from his lap. “You don’t have to keep doing that, you know.”

“To what are you referring?”

“You and I are fine,” Will said, latching onto Hannibal’s eye contact, crystal blue meeting cherry red.

“Are you certain?” Hannibal asked, unwavering.

“Of course I’m certain.”

Hannibal paused for a moment before speaking the next words, searching only for the young man’s honesty, knowing that it would not sound that way soon as the next question was asked.

“Are you certain that it isn’t love you share with Cooper?”

Will glared at him, and as luck would have it, that glare was interrupted by the sound of Cooper’s voice.

“Will!?” Cooper shouted. “Where the fuck are you?”

Will sighed and got to his feet.

“Over here!” Will yelled back, and before he knew it, the 6’5” man was barreling down the path, across the dock, and jumping into the water, tackling Will as he went. The water cracked with a splash and they both popped out of the water, Will yelling, “Cooperfuck!”

Cooper ran a hand through his hair and down his wet face as he laughed, “Oh calm down, you big pussy. Come here.”

Hannibal watched as Cooper pulled Will in for a forced kiss, a level of discomfort gnawing at his stomach like a vampire bat. They separated, but Cooper did not let go.

“It was just a joke. You forgive me?”

There was a moments pause, a second of hesitation when a familiar expression crossed Will’s face, and Hannibal thought that Will had finally ran out of forgiveness. But his hands slid up Cooper’s shoulders, draping around his neck.

“Of course, baby.”

Hannibal barely narrowed his eyes. He couldn't help the pang of jealousy that rose like a fiery beam inside him. The hatred never eased. The sight always elicited this level of pain.

How simply he could jump into the water, drown the large man, let his body wash up in a river basin days later smelling of decay, filled with bot fly maggots, half eaten by water fowl.

But Hannibal swallowed the malice, as poisonous as venom—slimy all the way down.

He would have to be patient, bide his time, and wait for Will to find that malice within himself. It was important for Will, and Will alone, to harness that malice and utilize it on a similar opportunity.

That was, of course, if that malice existed at all.

ENDEMISM PART II

The caged bird sings,
with fearful trill,
of things unknown,
but longed for still.

- Maya Angelou

1.

You can't run away from him, Billy Boy.

He's stuck to your side.

You asked for this.

Finish what you started.

Will's patience was wearing thin. He had endured this relentless, metaphysical badgering for far too long.

The voices that had plagued him for the past two years now spoke with an unsettling undertone—like they knew some irreversible shift had occurred but refused to tell Will about it. And what made matters worse was the fact that this morning, they all seemed to agree, which to Will, was worse than when they would all contradict each other in a cacophony of confusing and annoying muttering.

"*Just shut the fuck up*," he said to himself, aloud but subtle, exasperation adding unexpected force to his words.

A momentary silence rang inside his scull, as if they were taken aback by his response. Three of them had the where-with-all to remain silent, but there was one who spoke up, the tone and timber matching his own.

You can't silence yourself, Will. You know who you are.

The words echoed but the previously overpowering presence receded in his mind, diminishing in volume until Will was left in a hushed stillness of the damp morning.

He leaned over the porch railing, taking the last drag of his cigarette before snuffing it out, and watched as the sun peaked through the trees in shades of soft orange and yellow,

allowing the cool night its last moments—the only reprieve it would offer for the remainder of the day.

It was only a matter of time before he was interrupted. He knew that.

Hannibal would be out with a cup of coffee, or Cooper would wake up and ask him to come back to bed, or, god forbid, Gustav would walk out without a stitch of clothing on and try to make conversation. Just the thought of that had Will begging for the voices instead.

All three of those men had some expectation for this weekend, all vastly different, true enough, but an expectation none the less. Despite how Will had spent time and effort to manipulate and foster those expectations, and despite how he understood them to the fullest extent, they were still heavy.

Will didn't care to carry their weight anymore than he cared to listen the nameless voices inside his head.

And really, why should he have to? He had already carried a mega-shit-ton throughout his entire life. Didn't he deserve to relax for a while, or at the very least, the next few days?

All he wanted to do was exactly what he wanted to do, and nothing that other people wanted him to do, including Hannibal, who was getting just as bad as everyone else when it came to the constant pressure to be someone that only existed as a hypothetical, poorly constructed, too good to be true, mental fantasy.

Today, Will would be himself.

He was home. He never thought he'd be here again.

There was an odd doubling sensation to the experience, the sort of blurring of going cross eyed. Trying to focus his vision from two different perspectives, neither quite fitting the other.

The new Will was here, such as he was. But the old Will was still here somewhere, swimming in the lake or fishing from the dock. The old Will was mostly buried beneath the damp earth, but somehow the longer he sat inside the familiar space, the more it seemed that Will was still alive, digging his way to the surface.

2.

There was an open, dry-grass thicket at the far edge of the property, far past the lake, beyond the woods were the ground was covered in mushy pine needles. Today it reminded him of a held breath, and when Hannibal crossed its border, he could see Will standing like a frozen deer, just his silhouette under the morning sun rays.

The sound of crickets hushed and the last of the morning dew shimmered across the green, a hunter's portrait painted in real life, and Hannibal doubted any animal in the vicinity would dare show itself in the presence of such a portentous predator.

This was his territory, after all.

Will had not seen proper hunting grounds in years, yet he conducted himself as though he frequented this meadow. He squatted down, fingers brushing through the sharp blades, assessing a series of tracks that, to the untrained eye, would appear as nothing more than patted dirt.

Cooper took it upon himself to direct the remaining members of the hunting party by raising his fist like an army commander and brought them all to a halt.

Will stood and whispered, "light on your feet. There's probably a half-dozen rabbits in the high-grass."

They fanned out and all four entered the plat of tall bluestem.

Will had insisted on an early morning hunting excursion as part of the extended weekend's itinerary, and though neither man expressed interest in it the previous night, both Cooper and Gustav were more than enthusiastic about it when the morning arrived.

Cooper touted himself as *quite the sportsman*, detailing—on more than one occasion—the trips of his youth where he was "*raised with a shotgun in hand*" and "*trained as a marksmen since before he could speak*." He walked out of the bedroom that morning dressed in the best Orvis and Barbour had to offer, specifically casual in the way he wore the outfit. He may have, in fact, been wearing the attire of a professional, but to Hannibal, the veiled vanity was more akin to that of an amateur.

Will, on the other hand, wore the best Bass Pro had to offer. Canvas pants, a plaid shirt, a vest with various utility pockets, and a pair of ankle high camo boots.

Hannibal could admit now, walking through the thicket, brambles clinging to his marina wool shirt, Will's attire had been the perfect selection for the environment, even if it did nothing for him, aesthetically.

Will had vanished into the field, Gustav had barely entered it, and both Cooper and Hannibal converged on the same group of hares, pointing them out silently on several occasions, toward the western edge.

Hannibal was succeeding at his stalk—utilizing knowledge long forgotten—but the moment they approached shooting distance, the novelty of Cooper's height became a nuisance.

Even when he tried to walk carefully, his size and weight made the crackling of dry stalks sound more like splintering wood. Each step scared their prey another length ahead, and they pursued until the meadow ended, the herd scurrying down into a dense bier thicket.

Cooper swore under his breath, dropped his raised shotgun to his side, and put a hand on his hip. They paused at the edge of the thorny glen, both silently blaming the other. Evidently, having already lost his quarry, Gustav was quick to join them. He reached out to pinch at one of the thorns as if he were testing the severity only to find out that they drew blood much easier than he thought.

“Ouch.”

“That shit’s chest deep, too,” Cooper said, confirming the obvious fact.

“Oh well, time for breakfast,” Gus shrugged, but before Gustav had time to walk off, Will walked up beside the group, game bag already bearing the bulge of success, cracked gun dangling from his elbow.

With a twisted brow he looked at the three men, then out into the brier patch, then back at his compatriots.

“What happened?” He asked, confused.

“We’ve lost our quarry,” Hannibal announced.

“They’ve fucked off into the bier thicket,” Cooper add, gesturing toward their lost prey.

Still confused, Will looked at the three men again, then at the bier patch, then back at the three men.

“And?” he said flatly.

With six stunned eyes affixed to him, Will racked his gun and stepped into the underbrush in hot pursuit.

There was a millisecond of hesitation as they all watched the fearless man wade into the razor-like fauna. None of them really wanted to follow, but then again, they all wanted to follow.

Cooper was the first and he pretended like he hadn’t hesitated at all.

Gustav sighed and headed in behind them.

Hannibal, on the other hand, just stood, uncharacteristically brought to complete silence.

He watched Will trek into the underbrush, gun ready to take aim, quiet and graceful, maneuvering with ease, unbothered by the labyrinth of half-inch thorns that surrounded him.

The other two men were caught up in brambles almost ever other step.

But Will was born there, a creature raised from sharp tendrils.

By the time Hannibal caught up to them, Will had dispatched another three large hares and was carrying them back toward the meadow, Cooper and Gustav behind him.

“Got ‘em!” Will said with an all too pleased smile.

Will stopped when they returned to short grass, laid out his catch, and unsheathed his field dressing knife. He sliced beneath the fur, perforating the skin to pull the pelt from the body, and when he had trouble yanking it off with his hands, he clenched the furry pelt between his teeth and tore flesh from muscle.

Hannibal continued his intent observation, filled with aw and wonderment.

Measured against the magnitude of the previous lives Will had taken, those four rabbits represented a small and simple slaughter, its significance nearly benign. Yet to Hannibal, the moment held no triviality.

Of all the flesh, the blood, the carcasses, of all the murders and disembowelments Hannibal had witnessed, this was the most inexplicable and illustrious.

Hannibal had not fostered this ability, had not trained this skillset, had not coerced or manipulated this potential into action.

This hunt, this kill, was of Will Graham alone.

This man was, and always would be, the phenomenon that Hannibal knew him to be, a phenomenon beyond all understanding, beside which, the vastness of Hannibal’s ego shrank.

There was nothing Hannibal could give Will that he didn’t already have.

3.

The evening was no less hot or humid, merely absent of the harsh beating sun. Downtown was lit up with strings of antique light bulbs, surrounded by hypnotized insects of all kind. Main Street was a cobblestone promenade, littered with shops and cafes and bars.

All four men walked down the block, Gustav attached coquettishly to Cooper’s arm. Will and Hannibal remained two steps behind.

Hannibal had keen insight, but it didn’t require keen insight to see what was happening. Gustav had been far too friendly that night. He was between Cooper and Will at every possible moment, and when the two would split off, he’d start at one man then travel to the other, and continue this commute on repeat.

Cooper didn’t seem to mind—at all. He seemed to relish the attention, telling jokes Hannibal was sure anyone of sub par intelligence would find humorous, and of course, Gustav laughed at each one while throwing a hand onto Cooper’s large, most often, bare arm.

Honestly, it didn't seem that Cooper brought a shirt on this trip for how often he walked around without one.

He did, however, surprise Hannibal as they all dressed for an evening out, when he put on a full outfit, even if the excessively loose silk button-up brazenly exposed most of the man's chest.

Post freshly prepared rabbit dinner—and upon Gustav's suggestion—they went to an outdoor dive bar where a brass band played for an assortment of liquored up, dewy-skinned guests dancing beneath the lantern light.

They found a table and Will quickly order, what the seedy excuse for a cabaret called, *Gin Fizzes* but were more like a combination of various clear liquors topped with lemonade seltzer.

Will ensured Hannibal that they were, "delicious."

Hannibal sincerely doubted it.

The server brought them four ungarnished plastic cups, filled to the brim, and Hannibal eyed them with skepticism.

"Just take a sip," Will insisted, and after they toasted, Will used a two finger nudge at the bottom of Hannibal's cup, coaxing him to swallow the whole thing.

The cunning boy—constantly antagonizing.

Unable to resist the urge to play against the mischief, Hannibal opened his throat. Three large gulps and the drink was gone.

"If it's not good now, it will be in a minute, ey Lecter?" Cooper said, elbowing Gustav before swallowing down the rest of his drink and ordering four more.

After a few of those, all of them were far more jovial than they had ever been in each other's company.

Pretense dropped. Words loosened. Expectation vanished.

For a while, they found themselves enjoying the night.

Ever the purveyor of life's decadence, Hannibal indulged in every unburdened sensation the alcohol brought. He enjoyed himself, finding genuine pleasure in dancing with Gustav, who also zeroed in on pure enjoyment, leaving the expectations of their current relationship behind.

The music went in and out like the tide.

Song after song.

Cooper came around and asked Gus for a dance, and Hannibal took it as an opportunity to recuperate. He made his way back to the table, adjusting to his surroundings with several sips of ice water. Settling back into the existence of a world outside his hedonism, he realized that Will wasn't on the dance floor.

He scoured the crowd, the bar, the smokers pole out on the sidewalk, and rather abruptly, found the young man on a return approach, glassy-eyed, a smile across his face.

"Hey you."

Hannibal beamed.

Will had worn white linen that night, the loose fabric cinched with a brown belt, creating an elegant taper from his shoulders to his waist. As was customary, he had neglected to fasten his top three buttons, and the humid night collected on his skin making his face and chest glisten.

An irrepressible desire ignited inside Hannibal, its intensity exacerbated by intoxication. The caution he so often wore was a garment forgotten on the first sip, and there was nothing to restrain him.

Wherever Cooper was, he was not here now.

Will made it to the table just as a tango started. Hannibal took his hand and spun him to the dance floor.

Hannibal initiated the dance believing he would have to guide Will through it. He could not contain his surprise when he found the opposite to be true.

Will drew their bodies together, assertive and confident, pressing a hand flush with his lower back, and stepped in rhythm to lead them both across the dance floor.

He was fluid, sensual. Mischievous eyebrow quirked up, peering from under it, Will knew exactly what he was doing.

"Always so full of surprises."

Will looked up at Hannibal, a rakish grin on his face. "Does it excite you, Dr. Lecter?" he asked.

Affection spilled from Hannibal's expression, warm and provocative.

"It always has," he replied. "It always will."

They connected there. The sway of the music, the depth of rhythm, the flush of alcohol. Their faces hovered above one another, noses nearly grazing, breath shared through barely parted lips.

Heat emanated from their bodies, pulling more sweat from their skin, and through the sticky damp, they clung to each other.

Surely they looked into each other's eyes, but neither man noticed, too far inside something so resolute, steadfast and unending, that they no longer experienced their physical form, convinced, perhaps, that there was no definitive line separating them.

Hannibal recalled their adventures through Williamsburg, how there were no road blocks to prevent the free flow of intertwining bliss. Those nights they shared a bed, back at the beginning, when everything was new and untainted.

Hannibal found Will there, and for a moment, all that mattered was this song, this dance, this man in his arms.

And in an abrupt and disorienting snap, it vanished.

Like a sledge hammer driving down a wedge, Hannibal was sent staggering backward by a forceful, two-handed shove.

"The fuck you think you're doing, Lecter!?" Cooper yelled so loud it brought the surrounding crowd to silence, standing in the center of the dance floor like a raging bull.

Hannibal stood up into his full frame, reasserting his footing.

"Coop, we were just dancing," Will said, trying to call him off by clutching his arm.

"Just dancing," Cooper retorted, directing his words at Hannibal instead of Will. "Just dancing with your hands all over my fiancé."

"Cooper, come on. Knock it off."

Cooper turned and looked at Will. "And what were you doing?"

"I asked Will to dance," Hannibal interjected.

"I was waiting for you to come back," Will said. Cooper pinched his lips together, looking off as Will tried to calm him. "Come on. I could use a smoke," Will said, trying to usher him away.

As Cooper clumsily walked off the dance floor, he announced much louder than before, "You can't have him, you know! I won't let you!"

4.

It was strange what followed.

Hannibal didn't know what had transpired between the couple, nor the tactics Will used to quell Cooper's anger, but by the time they arrived back at the cottage, the convivial mood had returned.

Cooper didn't apologize for his outburst, of course, but he did engage Hannibal with good-humor. He continued to refill Hannibal's glass every time it would empty and continued to leave him alone in Will's company, despite his previous insistence that they remain apart.

The reason for his uncharacteristic behavior was made evident as the hours passed.

Gustav and Cooper entered each other's personal space and remained there, talking to each other when they were in company, frequently traveling to the porch to smoke or the kitchen to indulge in the nose candy Gus so generously provided.

It wasn't difficult to deduce the outcome.

"Like rare flowers, unexpected friendships blossom under the most anomalous of climates," Hannibal said, entering the living room with two drinks in hand.

Will took his drink, turning over his shoulder just once to glance into the kitchen to witness the new level of camaraderie. "Always good when the spouses get along," he said as he settled back into his seat.

Hannibal sat in the chair opposite Will, maintaining a safe distance. "It seems Cooper has forgiven our previous transgression," he mused.

"Yeah well…I threw him a bone," Will replied with a sigh, propping his feet on the coffee table. "He can chew on it for a while."

Hannibal glanced into the kitchen from under his brow to see the two men thoroughly engaged, then looked at Will with a soft smile. "Was this your suggestion or his?" He asked.

Will took another sip from his glass. "He wanted to. I just let him."

"Do you suppose this is their first encounter?" Hannibal asked, voice in a lower register.

"Mm. Don't know," Will offered back with a shrug, mirroring the low tone. "But the ball was rolling before we arrived."

They both knew the two men had been inside the same seedy circle for a few weeks now. Will knew because of how frequently Cooper was off with Litchman, and how often he was sorry for being off with Litchman. Hannibal knew because Gustav had outright said so. But neither Cooper nor Gustav had confessed to sleeping with each other, and while they might have kept something like that a secret, it would show in the way they interacted.

Hannibal trusted Will's keen insight, and his keen insight said, *"they haven't fucked yet but they definitely want to."*

Suddenly, the previously boisterous conversation emanating from the kitchen was replaced by silence and awkward smacking sounds.

Will knocked his head back to see, and sure enough, Gustav and Cooper were making out like lovers.

“Aaand there we go,” Will rocked his head back up and swallowed a gulp of his drink.

Eyes trailing from the kissing couple back to Will, Hannibal considered for a moment how this was affecting him and the alcohol made it easy to ask.

“Does it bother you?”

“What, them?” Will asked, brow raised.

Hannibal nodded.

Will dropped his gaze and upturned his lower lip, “Nah.”

But that wasn’t the truth. Hannibal dipped his head to collect Will’s eye contact, saying nothing but staring still.

“Alright,” Will confessed with a blink, mouth softening in a dim smile, “It bothers me more than I expected it to, but seeing as how that’s *my future husband* it doesn’t bother me as much as it should,” he joked.

Hannibal offered a smile that tended to the confession, light and easy. He considered the words and searched again for Will’s honesty, this time without the pretense of an expected response.

“You still find yourself attached to him.”

Will shrugged. “I think it’s more of an ego thing than an attachment thing.”

“You find it difficult to resolve the dissonance—witnessing someone who claimed eternal love desire another so easily.”

Will stared off, tongue swashing over his bottom lip. “Hard not to assign meaning to something like that,” he said somberly.

“You know, Will—Cooper’s actions are not a reflection of your worth.”

Will’s eyes flitted up, face pinching as he uttered, “Still stings though,” his words almost inaudible.

Will paused for a moment, looking at Hannibal with more intention than Hannibal could contend with, something so vivid that it was almost blinding. In the past, Hannibal had seen glimpses of this man, the one under the shell, but only in moments, both fearsome and glorious, that Will was making a definitive choice and claiming a truth. This—this was a moment of truth.

Perhaps it was his vulnerable frankness, his casual and open disposition, his timid inflection, or perhaps it was the honesty itself.

The three words detailed a long history that defined and explained an abstraction. Hannibal suddenly looked at Will and felt something else, something new, some type of tenderness and

sympathy.

It amused Hannibal that for a moment, he wasn't concerned with how the man had touched Will, but that Cooper had hurt the heart he didn't know, the precious pure yet vile thing that lived inside Will's chest—Hannibal was afraid Cooper had broken it.

He latched onto Will with sincerity, his eyes casting an unending nexus into the young man, and whispered,

"I'm sorry he hurt you."

Trying to maintain his gaze, Will blinked once, then several times. His glassy eyes moistened and he looked away. He took the last of his drink, swallowing hard.

Hannibal went to speak, but the moment was interrupted when Cooper walked into the room.

He stood in front of Will and offered his open hand. "Come to the bedroom for a second?" He said.

The seated man flitted his eyes once in Hannibal's direction, full of a nameless anxiety, and Hannibal watched, sparked with concern.

"Right now?" Will asked.

Cooper insisted, not aggressive yet commanding, by flicking his hand open and closed. Will took the hand, got up from his seat, and disappeared with Cooper down the hall.

Moments later, Gustav arrived, a suggestive grin across his face. He perched himself on Hannibal's lap, arms draped around his neck.

"We've been invited to a party, my darling."

"Is that so?" Hannibal asked, slightly perturbed but pleasant.

"You and me, and," Gustav peered over his shoulder then gestured his head down the hall, "Coop and Will."

Certain a similar discussion was being had behind the closed door, Hannibal glanced toward the bedroom, thinking without expression.

"Come on," Gus coaxed, playfully shaking Hannibal's shoulders. "We've never done four and I'm eager."

Clearing his throat and shifting beneath Gustav's weight, Hannibal assumed the disposition of a boyfriend, caring if not somewhat distant, and looked up at the man in his lap.

"Your choices are not contingent on my permission, Gustav. You're welcome to pursue any pleasures you'd like."

Gustav sucked his teeth. “Yes I know,” he said, dipping a kiss on Hannibal’s neck. “But I want you to join me.”

Hannibal was subtle in how he pulled from the affection. “I’d rather not,” he said, intent on avoiding any debauchery he and Cooper had planned.

“Ok well,” Gustav huffed, rolling his eyes and standing up. “Coop won’t do it unless Will is there, so I can join them while you sit out here by yourself, or you can join me and we can have some fun.”

It was easy to make the decision after that.

Hannibal had mistakenly believed Will could potentially decline and return to the living room for a chased yet peaceful evening. The sudden addition of Will had been alarming enough to warrant Hannibal’s immediate agreement.

He didn’t know if this had been Will’s idea, or he had been coerced, or asked, or forced, but Hannibal knew that no one, no matter the circumstances, would lock Will in a room without him.

Gustav smiled with excitement, surely believing Hannibal shared the sentiment. He pulled Hannibal by his fingers and lead the taller man down the hall.

Hannibal had no desire to share a bed with Cooper Kennedy, in fact the very thought repulsed him, but when he walked through the door, that no longer mattered.

Cooper was forcing his lips on Will, both hands holding his face.

And in an instant Cooper dropped him, separated from the kiss, discarded without care, and went over to Gustav.

Hannibal looked at Will who blinked slowly as stared into the center of the room, like he was debating whether he should look at Hannibal or not, and when he finally did, pain was like a knife shredding through Hannibal’s heart.

It was the same conflicted expression Hannibal had seen a year ago when in the early morning hours, the young man stepped into the light and revealed the abuse he had suffered.

Hannibal had witnessed so many things second hand, every divisive, manipulative, emotional and physical thing—as a result, an effect, experiencing only how those things lived inside Will after the initial impact.

Now, Hannibal was inside the room, behind the closed door, and he saw the way Cooper preyed on Will, how he beat with more than fists, how even his kiss was violent, and how in a space that small, there was nowhere to safely step.

This room had been Will’s life, and no matter where he went, the four walls still surrounded him. Cooper was always there with him, scrutinizing, punishing, rewarding his every move with both pain and pleasure.

“Will, baby. Come on, come to the bed,” Cooper said, waving him over.

Blank, devoid of emotion, Will obeyed. Cooper kissed him for a second, then returned his attention to Gustav.

Hannibal seized the opportunity. He drew his shirt from his body, sank to the bed, and maneuvered over to Will. He crawled overtop of him, and Will’s eyes went wide, putting an apprehensive hand on Hannibal’s chest.

Their eyes locked, the maroon glistening dark and meaningful, sending its radiant black fire into Will’s sorrowful blue seas. Will returned the stare, shifting his eyes, searching inside Hannibal, silently worried, silently steady, silently asking for help, silently screaming that he didn’t want to do this, silently apologizing, silently angry, silently trying to figure out what to do.

And Hannibal heard him.

“Do you trust me?” he whispered.

Will nodded.

Slowly, softly, one flickering motion at a time, Hannibal pressed his lips to Will’s like a promise, calming him, guiding him, showing him the way out.

But once again, Cooper Kennedy kept trying to control the entire situation.

“Ey!” Cooper yelled.

They both stopped abruptly and looked over at him and his tensed, very serious expression.

“Not on the mouth.”

“Not on the mouth?” Gustav laughed. “Coop, come on. Relax. Too many rules will spoil the fun,” he said in a tease, kissing his way down the tense man’s torso, and by the time he reached his destination, Cooper had eased up.

Hannibal added to the show, doing things like grabbing Gustav’s ass and sending a hand through his hair as he sucked.

“Good man, Lecter. Got your boy well trained,” Cooper laughed, tonguing his lower lip. “Will, come get some of this.”

Cooper reached over and pulled Will with a firm grip, groping him.

Hannibal couldn’t stand it, watching him touched without permission. As if he were witnessing the most heinous of crimes, the beast inside him bore its teeth. His arm flew up, hand grabbing Cooper by the neck, forcing his head back against the headboard.

Cooper clamped down on his wrist, unsure but severe, fiery green eyes fighting against the power of Hannibal’s blood red gaze.

They sat there for a moment, everyone stalled, the two large men breathing deep, ready to initiate the next move should the other advance first.

Suddenly, a gentle hand reached up around Hannibal's shoulder, his neck, trying to bring him back. Will was there and he was soft, looking at him, begging him.

"Easy," he whispered.

Hannibal's eyes shifted between Will and Cooper. He had made a promise but he could not allow this to continue. He found his love for Will overpowered every instinct inside him. If the monster was not allowed out, if death was not an option, then diversion would be the only escape.

Hannibal remained and, in that moment, protecting the man he loved, knowing that only one thing would throw Cooper back far enough to keep him at bay, he sacrificed himself.

He sat up on his knees, leaned forward, and Hannibal Lecter kissed Cooper Kennedy.

It was unbearable, full of malice, tasting of malt liquor, pours lined with sun tan lotion, vetiver, and the stink of several days unwashed skin, and all Hannibal could think of was how Will had suffered through every single unwanted touch from this man's flesh.

The only way that the man would ever taste remotely good was if he were roasted under a herb and peppercorn Au Jus.

He didn't know when, or how, but Hannibal would end Cooper's life and consume every horrific thing he had ever done to Will, forever purging the world of its rot.

He slid his body between Cooper and Will, whispering to redirect Gustav, throwing him the the ravenous dog. Gustav turned around with a grin, ready to show off, straddling Cooper's lap. Hannibal helped as Cooper held himself in alignment, then ushered Gustav down.

"Ah, fuck yeah," Cooper groaned.

Gustav started bouncing and they were occupied once again.

Sex had never felt so much like pulling teeth.

Then Will's hands returned to Hannibal's body. He turned and found the young man's lips, cradling his face when it offered gratitude. Will clasped the back of Hannibal's neck and brought him in, pulling the larger man down on top of him, sinking under his body.

Hannibal pressed his lips to Will's ear and whispered, in a tone only audible to the two of them,

"Are you alright?"

Will nodded gently, the side of his face brushing Hannibal's.

Just as Hannibal and Will began to relax into each other, Cooper, who was grunting salaciously as Gustav bounced, halted everything with a sudden, aggressive grab of Hannibal's arm.

Everyone stopped.

Gustav turned over his shoulder, looking over at Hannibal and Will.

Terror returned briefly to Will's face, and Hannibal stoically looked down at the hand around his arm, then back up at the face trying desperately hard to intimidate.

"If you cum inside him—I'll kill you," Cooper said harshly, then dropped his grip, and as if he were another person entirely, looked at Will and leaned over. "Give me a kiss, baby."

Will didn't want to, but he did.

Once the demon was appeased, he returned to what he was doing with Gustav. Cooper side-eyed for only a moment longer then was distracted once again.

Hannibal returned to Will, laying on top of him. He adjusted them both to avoid penetration, mimicking movement as a ruse to the other occupants of that vile sex bed, curving around Will's small body with tenderness, promising with each breath that this would never happen again, admitting that he should have never let this go on for as long as it did, and apologizing for every action that preceded it.

The way in which Will clutched Hannibal in those brief moments, so desperate and possessive and longing and sad, fingertips tugging flesh into small hills, brought a dry sob to Hannibal's throat. He swallowed hard, nuzzling into Will's neck, kissing softly with closed eyes.

They waited there together until the other men climaxed and dropped, panting hard, eyelids drooping.

After Cooper and Gustav separated and left the bed for showers or more drinks or any other half dazed, post sex ritual, Will rolled over, tucking his body into Hannibal's, and Hannibal collected Will, his body serving as the protective barrier between this beautiful young man and the room he was trapped in.

Hannibal pulled the blanket from the bed, draping it over their bodies, and when Hannibal wrapped his arm around Will's torso, he felt it hitch several times. He squeezed tighter, and so did Will, which only seemed to ring more anguish from the man.

Hannibal kissed his neck and back, burrowing his nose into the bed of chocolate curls, trying to quell the sobs Will was trying desperately to conceal.

"It's over now, Will. I have you."

Will moved only slightly, dragging a finger through a tear he was unable to contain, and whispered with a wet voice,

“I can’t do this anymore, Hannibal.”

“He’ll never touch you again.”

Will rolled over, folding his arms between their two bodies and nuzzling his damp face into Hannibal’s soft chest hair, twirling a few strands between his fingers.

How unfathomable.

The same man who slayed coiling vipers, who seductively danced to tango music, who carelessly walked through brier fields, who pulled the skin off a fresh kill using the edges of his sharp teeth, that feral and ferocious man brought to a sad ruin because of Cooper Kennedy.

It was not the location, nor the landscape, nor the environment that prevented Will from hatching into the imago he was destined to be. All this time, the tight and confining spaces the world put around him—asking him to be one thing or another, threatening his very humanity if he didn’t comply—had set Will in this bed, chest heaving as he suppressed a dry sob, wrestling with the turmoil of wanting freedom from behind the bars of cage after cage after cage.

Hannibal had pushed him to this. Every action from that night in Wolf Trap to this night in Louisiana had been an effort, futile in its nature, constructed out of fear, to free Will on his own terms.

Despite having every key, Hannibal continued to fumble through them, both unwilling and unable to access the correct one—the one that unlatched the lock—because he feared the flight that might follow.

There would be more turmoil to follow this—the kind of turmoil that always followed the truth—but it was what Will deserved.

Will knew which key worked. He had always known. All Hannibal had to do now was hand them over and let the young man free himself.

5.

He didn’t know how long they slept there, but daylight was approaching when he felt the bed undulate beside him. At first he thought it was Will waking, but when he opened his eyes, a hazy, tussle-haired, fully erect Cooper Kennedy was drawing back the duvet and trying to slide in behind Will.

“Baby. Baby wake up,” he said, kissing along Will’s neck. “I wanna be inside you.”

He apparently didn’t notice that Hannibal was awake, or he did notice and didn’t care, either way, he started groping Will, continuing even when the young man didn’t rouse.

Cooper had spent the past four days using every weapon in his arsenal to keep Will away from Hannibal, and Hannibal Lecter decided at that very moment, that it would be the last time Cooper tried anything.

He grabbed Cooper’s wrist with all the force he could muster, pushing the large man back.

“The fuck, Lecter,” Cooper said with a gravely voice.

“You will not touch him again.”

“I’ll touch him whenever I damn well please, fucker. Let me go,” Cooper said, still not taking the moment seriously, lost in the fog of his hangover.

Hannibal asserted his stance, sitting up fully and knocking Cooper off the bed.

“Did you not hear me the first time?” Hannibal stepped from the bed with grace and precision.

Cooper tried to get up but Hannibal shoved him back down.

“Hannibal!? What the fuck are you doing!?” Will yelled, the sounds finally waking him.

Hannibal didn’t reply, falling into his knees that pressed heavy onto Cooper’s shoulder, hands gripping around the man’s bulging neck with animalistic strength.

Cooper’s face was going red, his legs were flailing, his hands pulled at Hannibal’s arms and slapped at his face.

Will fumbled out of bed and grabbed Hannibal’s arm, “Hannibal, let him go,” he said calmly at first. “Let him go, Hannibal.”

Hannibal maintained his grip, forcing air and life from Cooper Kennedy’s body.

“HANNIBAL! STOP!”

The words were powerful, beckoning, a force to be reckoned with. They commanded, and with that Hannibal dropped his hold. Cooper pushed him off and they all stood in the bedroom—panting, staring.

Hannibal looked at Cooper, angered. Hannibal looked at Will, gaze cast downward, also angered. The young man took two short steps and stood in front of Cooper.

“You should go,” Will said, quietly.

Hannibal huffed, trying to find the young man's eye contact, as bitter as he was heartbroken when he was denied.

"I'm not leaving."

"Yes you are," Will replied, this time more stern, locking on with his cobalt eyes. "Leave. Now."

Hannibal paused for a moment longer, contemplating his next move, then left the room.

He would be gone before the sun reached the mid-morning sky, leaving all three men behind.

THE RED WALLPAPER

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1.

Inside the cocoon of that blacked out Mercedes, the world outside felt distant, muffled by heavy doors and tinted glass. The cabin, hermetically sealed from the city pong, held the faint scent of leather and fresh filtered air.

Will slouched in the back seat of the Kennedy hired car, his head lolling gently with each rhythmic shift and turn. His eyes traced lines across the window as he watched the landscape pass through its frame. The relentless rush-hour traffic had eased, allowing Vick to navigate down the highway, gliding like a boat on a stream.

In that insulated space, Will was an observer, sheltered from the ongoing chaos outside.

These would be his last moments of peace, perhaps indefinitely.

They had just dropped Cooper off at the office downtown, less than an hour after landing at JFK. The plane had barely touched down when Charles had called. He asked for an immediate meeting, claiming it was urgent, and Cooper had seethed the entire ride into the city, exiting the car with little less than a grunt goodbye.

The man was livid.

The hours on the plane ride home, and hence the hours leading up to it, were spent in a tense, mostly one-sided, argument.

Cooper was fed up with the antics. The incident at the cottage had been the final straw. He had been dealt one too many blows to his ego and he blatantly refused to suffer another. Will had tried to talk him down, of course, but that had been a futile effort. The boiling furnace that was Cooper Kennedy had finally reached maximum pressure, and one wrong move risked explosion.

Feeling that he now had the right, Cooper made a litany of demands.

Will was to move out of Williamsburg and into the penthouse, immediately. He would also set a date for the wedding so they could marry before the end of the year. And, *“most importantly, and I cannot make this clear enough,”* Cooper had said, *“you will sever all contact with Hannibal Lecter.”*

He further explained that if Will refused to comply, then he’d make a phone call and ensure he no one saw Hannibal Lecter again.

The threat was sincere.

This wasn't a game—not anymore.

Exiting the FDR, they merged onto South Street and made a right onto Clinton, headed over the Williamsburg Bridge. They passed beneath the high iron archways, towering buildings shrinking behind them, giving way to open skies.

Below, the East River shimmered in the evening amber light, the Manhattan skyline dimming to a shade of deep blue.

Will felt his chest empty, the view snatching the air from his lungs. New York City hadn't ever been Will's first choice, but at that moment, he could only admit, it was a fearsome sight to behold.

This was a transitional space—the deep breath between two very different worlds. Will had traversed it countless times without thought. It took mere minutes to cross, but that evening, Will was grateful for every single second.

The road descended until it met the opposite shore, crossing into Brooklyn, unfurling turn by turn into the borough.

Will watched the scenery change.

The unimposing streets—noble brownstones set behind tree-lined sidewalks—were so familiar to him that they now felt like home. While it did come with a settling ease, Will experienced a subtle sense of displacement, as if he had been gone forty years and not four days.

It was as if he were revisiting a place from a cherished memory, something that was once vast and vibrant, but suffering the hallowing passage of time, no longer existed.

The streets, the buildings, the city itself, had shrunk in his absence, and he saw it now with more seasoned eyes, realizing the implications of everything he experienced there.

It truly was an amalgam of sticky feelings, a nearly suffocating array of conflicting emotion, so painfully frustrating, that Will could barely stand it.

He didn't know who he was more upset with—Cooper Kennedy, Hannibal Lecter, or himself.

He hated that no one trusted him, and further still, he hated that he wasn't trustworthy.

Hannibal hadn't trusted him. He had pushed farther and faster than Will wanted to go, so when he suggested Hannibal finish things for him, he thought—deep to his core—that the request had been sincere.

Will didn't realize it wasn't until the moment he witnessed Hannibal's hands around Cooper's throat.

When he commanded Hannibal to let go, he was so sure that was the right choice.

Now, he had no idea which decision reflected his truth.

Perhaps he hoped that Hannibal would continue even past his plea because, well, when did Hannibal Lecter ever reserved himself? When had he ever reeled it back, given life instead of taken it, enacted mercy instead of wrath? When had he ever obeyed anyone—ever?

Hannibal had chosen that exact moment to finally listen to Will and because of it, their entire plan had failed.

It seemed fated now that he find peace in his coupling with Cooper and settle into a mundane life.

Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

The car arrived at Berry & N 8th Street and pulled up to the curb. Vick got out to open Will's door, waiting for him to step out, then unloaded his luggage from the trunk.

"Thank you, Vick."

"You're welcome, sir."

The car drove off.

Will inhaled the evening air into his lungs and expelled it through a deep and heavy sigh. A balmy breeze ruffled his hair, lightly kissing his face, as he took a moment outside the building's front entrance.

He recalled the first time he did this, the first time he stood at this door—that sweltering summer so filled with promise, Hannibal at his side.

Tonight, though, Will was alone, and the weight of uncertainty associated with that fact settled upon his shoulders.

There was no telling if Hannibal was inside the apartment or if he had finally left for good. Deep down, Will knew the answer, but that didn't bring him any kind comfort.

Will stood inside a sliver of space wedged between Hannibal's world and Cooper's world, in a perpetual purgatory, and it seemed to him that entering either would officially trap forever.

This building had once represented stability for Will Graham, a place for him to call home, but now it stood as a symbol of his fractured life.

He sighed again.

Figuring he had stalled long enough, Will plunged a hand into his pocket and withdrew his keys. He splayed the set of three around the silver ring so he could select the correct one, and for a second, a thought gripped his vision, locking him into a blank stare.

How many times had Hannibal fumbled through a similar ring, searching but never finding the one he needed? How many times had Will told him the correct combination of key to lock

only to have Hannibal confused again days later?

Didn't he know how to gain access to the space that he purchased? The home that he curated? This was Hannibal's world, the one he built. Why didn't he know how to get inside? Why did he continue to struggle at the entrance?

Weren't these his keys? Weren't these his locks? Weren't these his doors?

Will brushed off the thought, selected the gold key, and slid it into the tumbler.

It won't be the same.

Will knew.

Even before he pushed the door open, he knew.

There were a number of logical explanations for why he knew.

Maybe he understood that temporary fixes, no matter how thorough, only lasted so long. Maybe he had predicted that, due to age, the deterioration would eventually progress to this point. Maybe he had sensed from the very beginning, upon first seeing the small corner of white, that it was bound to happen.

Then again, maybe the building had warned him from the start.

Perhaps Will had always known.

He only took two echoing steps into the lobby before he was brought to a complete standstill. Lips barely parting, jaw dropped just enough to gasp, Will's eyes darted up and around the room.

It'll never be the same.

The walls were almost unrecognizable, a dilapidated version of the pristine lobby he had walked through over two years ago. Almost every corner and seam of the embossed red wallpaper had peeled up, exposing huge gaps of the wall beneath.

The once glossy, swirling filigree—so ornate and carefully designed—was dull, cracked, and frayed, the remaining paper barely holding on to the yellowing glue. And something about it—the way it was trying so hard to remain stuck to the walls, clinging almost desperately to a building that had outgrown it—cleaved Will in two.

A shell that no longer fit.

The longer he looked at it, the more he felt it staring back at him.

It grated like sandpaper. Itched like a scab. Burned like growing pains.

It hurt. It hurt like heartbreak. It hurt like love.

Will brought his fingers to his sternum and scratched.

Thinking back to the stories his superintendent, Joe, had told him about that building— the awful history it contained—Will understood his role in the story it continued to tell.

There wasn't much time left. Soon this would all be gone, passing behind Will, a story all its own. If days were all he had left, then he could, at the very least, leave something better behind.

And out of the silence, everyone reached a consensus.

You know the story.

Finish what you started.

Peel it up, Billy Boy.

See what's underneath.

2.

Will entered the foyer and unloaded his bags, pushing his shoes off one heel at a time. He dropped his keys into the ceramic dish, swashing off his jacket. He glanced around in a passive check, first down to either end of the hallway, then to the living room and kitchen.

The entire space was dark, the diminishing light outside barely penetrating the casement windows. A cold stillness clung to the wood floors and brick walls, its dense silence punctuated only by the low hum of the living room fan and the feint ticking of Hannibal's antique clock.

The apartment was empty.

Will was alone.

He went to his bedroom, flicked on the light, and leaned against the doorframe.

He'd start packing that night. It wouldn't take him long. A few days at most. There wasn't much to take, truth be told.

Everything he owned fit neatly into that small space, and for a moment, Will tried to imagine what his belongings would look like when spread through the vastness of an upper east side penthouse.

It was strange.

So much had been left behind when he came to New York. He'd taken so little of his old life with him, choosing to abandon things that had meaning but no real value, all in effort to fit inside a new space—the purging of someone long gone.

The process would repeat itself over the coming days.

Looking around his room, Will knew he would take everything with him, pack it all and leave nothing behind, preserving even the smallest remnants of this life.

If he ever changed, if his life ever expanded into something he didn't recognize, at least he would have the memory of who he was in that bedroom—the man he became in that apartment.

It started with the stacks of books he kept beneath the window.

Under the amber glow of lamplight, there in the semi-dark room, Will sat on the floor and codified his small collection of used literature. He took his time thumbing through the pages like pictures in a scrapbook, allowing each one to elicit a memory before being placed into the cardboard box beside him.

Some were worthless works of fiction, more entertainment than great literature. Then there were the coverless ones with raggedy binding and pages that smelled of mildew and vanilla. There was one in particular that he paused over, one that made him smile. He opened it, brought the crease to his nose, and inhaled. His eyes closed, the fragrance transporting him to the burgundy leather armchair sat inside Langston's bookstore.

There were very few comforting places left for Will Graham, the memories now tainted with the pain that surrounded them, but that one remained pristine.

History, philosophy, poetry, they were all part of the routine discussions he had with Hannibal, ideas exchanged freely, which was a beautiful sentiment in and of itself, but paled in comparison to the easy silence they shared inside that space.

Those hours held no expectation. They simply existed.

Will closed the used edition of Da Vinci's Leicester Codex, slid it beside the others, and folded the top of the box closed. He uncapped a marker and scrolled books/langstons across the side, then added it to the short stack now piled beside the door.

When the floor was bare once again, Will opened his closet and plopped down on the side of the bed. His wardrobe wasn't huge, more diverse than it probably ever had been, but the task still seemed daunting. He wiped his face, hand rubbing over his eyes and unshaven jaw.

Books were disposable. Clothes, however, clothes were necessary. Will wasn't the type to throw out clothing, which meant that if his clothes weren't inside his closet, then he had taken them somewhere else.

Another closet. Another room. Another home.

For whatever reason, the very notion seemed almost impossible to contend with, like if he emptied the closet then he was admitting defeat.

So he avoided it.

Picking an easier hill to climb, Will started with his nightstand. He found another box, set it on the bed, and sat back down.

The drawer had collected a great deal of trash over time, things tossed aside out of laziness or need—dried up old pens, notes with outdated messages, a handful of loose extra-large condoms, a nearly empty bottle expired aspirin.

He did dispose of that much.

With the clutter removed, only the items of value remained, and a smile crossed Will's lips when his eyes landed on a nearly forgotten about item. He reached in and retrieved it, delicately letting it rest in his palm.

The small lock of grey flecked hair, bound by a thread, was as perfect as it ever had been, still spurring the same quiet and giddy elation it always did.

Will laid back on the bed, perched the bundle on his upper lip, and released his hand to his chest. He took a deep inhaled, eyes closing as rolled the coarse filaments between his upper lip and nose, feeling the gentle fibers against his skin, still laced with that delicious sweet musk.

He thought of the body those hairs belonged to, the odor that diffused from the skin, the warmth of each growling breath, the power exerted by every undulating muscle.

He could consume this feeling, feast upon forever.

And in an instant, the sensation had substance. The body materialized, its weight sinking into the mattress beside him.

Will eyes popped open.

There was a ringing silence, time slowing into eternity, before Will felt his thudding heartbeat trail back into his body—not just from surprise, but from the affection he had only hoped to contain.

Hannibal poised above him and plucked the small bundle from Will's lip. Like a shadow cast over the sun, soothing and ominous at the same time, his presence flooded the room, full to the brim.

"Hannibal," Will uttered softly.

"Hello, Will."

"I thought you left."

Hannibal sank further into the bed, letting the full weight of his body encase the man beneath him. His thick, monstrous heart was like a slow, muffled drum, and Will felt it beating hard against his chest. The two rhythms intermixed, one indiscernible from the other.

“Did you believe you’d be rid of me so easily?” He replied with a soft smile, garnet eyes glinting like embers.

A heavy ache clutched Will’s chest—hot from bitterness, wet from sorrow.

Hannibal knew as well as he did that this was at its end. They couldn’t continue, not without risking a heartbreak Will couldn’t even begin to entertain, and these tender affections only made the impending separation harder.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, choking on his words.

“Why are you doing this?”

Hannibal threaded his fingers through Will’s hair, the touch so delicate that it raised tiny bumps across his skin.

"He won’t keep me from you,” Hannibal uttered, face so close to Will now, breath warm as spice. “I live inside you, Will—as ceaseless as your own heartbeat."

Will suppressed a shiver, feeling the brush of Hannibal’s lips, teasing at an insistent pressure, almost like an ask.

Some part of Will wanted to resist, to push Hannibal away and reaffirm their fate. But another part of him, a darker part, craved the touch. He was losing his conviction, forgetting himself entirely.

So he reached up and answered.

Will collected the plump mouth, sending his hands through the silky grey hair to draw the larger man in. He felt Hannibal caress his body, and he added to his efforts, sighing through the exchange as lips met lips in pale, moist suctions.

The kiss was languid and warm. It offered so much desire. Shared so much despair. Held a lifetime of unspoken words.

Will tried to convince himself that there was, indeed, a pain so wretched that it rendered this kiss obsolete, but he struggled against the deep and unending connection they shared in moments like this.

When Hannibal started trailing kissed down the column of his neck, Will tilted his head back, allowing those sharp teeth to graze his skin. Brow upturned, mouth dropping open, he released a faint moan.

It only stoked the fire. Hannibal returned to kiss his mouth with force while his fingers fiddled with the buttons of Will’s shirt. He unlatched them one by one, perking the pink nipples when he finally drew it open. Will writhed beneath him, feeling a large, vascular hand slide down his sternum, across his trembling stomach, slowing to a teasing speed as it traced along his scar.

Arousal surged into Will so fast it made him lightheaded, and he fell away from the kiss, breathless and blinking. His cock hardened against Hannibal's thigh, nearly painful with need.

The euphoria tore through him just as the knife once had, and suddenly it shifted into something else entirely.

Bile rose in Will’s stomach, swelling to a point of near disgust. It was a terrifying yet familiar sensation, one he hadn’t expected—at least not here. Not with Hannibal.

It was the same pleasured nausea he felt every time Cooper Kennedy touched him.

Taken out of the moment, Will’s eyes shot open.

Bitterness, jealousy, anger, sadness, had left a trail of destruction, the evidence of its violence etched into Will's skin. Hannibal had sliced through him, and now his hand highlighted the abuse, using it to weaken Will’s resolve.

That scar was the same as any other scar on his body, another indent in the clay, made by the sculptor’s hand.

The apartment was suddenly small. Walls that had witnessed so much love and darkness closed in around him. Inside the confined space that he had come to know so well, Will found a painful clarity.

He couldn’t do this. Not anymore.

"Hannibal," he stuttered, wet heat pooling behind his eyes. “Stop.”

Hannibal’s touch lingered, still trying to hold on.

But Will persisted and gently pushed against his chest, forcing them to separate.

Hannibal finally ceased his affections and reeled his neck back, eyes flitting back and forth between the pale blue irising, searching for something they could not find.

“Don’t be so eager to banish this moment, Will,” Hannibal said. “You may come to wish you hadn't."

"We can’t keep this, Hannibal,” Will replied, offering the sorrow as a kindness. “It’s already gone.”

Hannibal withdrew further, clearly hurt by the words, and Will could almost see the dark clouds gather. He looked at Will now, usually so composed, with a flickering vulnerability. He spoke, his tone edged with resignation.

“Is this how it is to end for us?”

The fullness of the room vanished.

“What else would you have me do?” Will replied, somber.

"I'd have you remain in the life you so fervently claimed to desire,” Hannibal stated, his voice soft but his face harsh. “The one you chose when you valued our companionship above safety."

"I never chose this," Will contended.

Hannibal looked at him like he was speaking gibberish. Confusion curved the sharp lines of his features, turning his eyebrows into furrowed stone.

“Will,” he stated before drawing his query. “Do you not recall our last night in Wolf Trap?"

The unexpected question made Will retreat behind his eyes, held back by a trace of resignation.

The memory of that night, like a ghost, lingered at the edge of Will's consciousness. He had seen it as a vision in the flashing white, the details blurred beyond recognition. As close as he had gotten, Will could not bring the contents into full focus.

He responded with brooding sense of denial. "I don't want to discuss it," he said, tersely. “I already told you that.”

"You continue to deny it?" Hannibal asked, the self-assured haughtiness returning to his demeanor.

“I don’t remember and I've made peace with that,” Will asserted.

“Denying its existence only prolongs the inevitable."

Will mentally scoffed at that remark. It was as if Hannibal dismissed the previous statement entirely, automatically assuming it was a lie. And, as it always did, the condescending arrogance reignited Will's defiance.

“That doesn’t matter now,” he said, and when he tried to stand, Hannibal pushed him back to the bed.

“So it would seem," Hannibal said, a new tone to his voice. "How unfortunate, then, that you did not see the success of your ventures. So close only to fumble at the finish line.”

Will clenched his jaw, frustrated “What that's supposed to mean?” He asked

The two garnet eyes darkened, boring into Will with venom. “Cooper is still alive—saved by the sound of your voice. How apt that I should make an enemy of him,” he said, the words heavy with implication.

But Will didn’t not break eye-contact. “I went on that trip to help you make amends with Cooper. You’re the one who ruined that opportunity."

Hannibal grew incredulous. So he volleyed back. “Fortunately, your relationship remains steadfast. You can move into his penthouse, safe and sound inside the Kennedy cage.”

“I can’t change the outcome, Hannibal."

“Perhaps that’s true,” Hannibal conceded, now dressed fully in his vile jealousy. “But even a bird ceases to beat itself against the cage. How long will it be, do you imagine, before you calcify inside the confinement?”

When Will cut his eyes away and didn’t respond, Hannibal continued.

“When your physical form remains and your mind yearns for freedom, you’ll remember this moment and it will hang in the air of your ivory tower like untraced smoke.”

The insinuation of Hannibal's words brooked no misunderstanding.

“It’ll be different,” Will said, inflecting with full confidence. “*Cooper and I* want it to be different.”

The statement slid between them like friction. The harsh detachment, the growing rage, the hurt and heartbreak, all contrasted against the physical intimacy they shared lying in that bed together. Hannibal pressed his full weight against Will, pinning him down with force, and brought his face to hover just above the young man's lips.

“And when you’ve moved from this life," he whispered, breathing the words like a hidden threat. "Will you think of me?”

And with a single word, Will refused the intimidation.

“No.”

Silence sucked life from the room.

Hannibal pulled away from Will’s body, leaving behind a vacant ache. He reached over, picking up the lock of his own hair, and returned it to Will’s lip. Voice low, timbre vibrating, filled with a profound sense of warning, he spoke.

"Be careful of your certainty in the choices that you make."

And as if he had been nothing more than an apparition, Hannibal left the room.

3.

The next morning, Will called Joe first thing.

“I need to peel up the wallpaper in the lobby. Mind giving me a hand?”

“I’ve been waiting on your call, Mr. Graham. I’ll be right over.”

Will dropped the phone from his ear, somewhat perplexed. If Joe had seen the damage, why didn’t he just fix it himself? The thought came and went without much consideration.

It didn’t matter how or why it had gotten to this point. The circumstances were what they were. The wallpaper had to be removed. There was no way around it. What came before or after was irrelevant.

Will got dressed, retrieved his small assortment of tools, and went downstairs just as Joe walked though the front door.

“Mr. Graham! Long time no see.”

“Hey Joe,” Will said, greeting the man with a pat on the back. “Sorry to drag you out of bed.”

“Oh, that’s just fine. Been meanin’ to make a visit here as it was,” Joe said, setting down his toolbox and wiping his mouth with his handkerchief. “Reckon this place is long overdue for an overhaul.”

"Let's get started, then," Will said, approaching the nearest wall to assess the damage.

This project would take some time. They’d have to spend a couple hours working on it, at the very least. Even though wallpaper removal was a simple enough process and half the paper was already falling off, the lobby was large and the walls were high.

But these things take time. Nothing good ever came easy.

Will walked over to the mailboxes near the elevator where the source of the problem sat. That first corner, the one he had seen two years ago, the one that was once only a few inches wide, had crawled up the entire seam, curling back the paper like a scroll.

Will pinched the edge between his fingers and gave it a tug to test the integrity of the remaining adhesive. The paper peeled away with relative ease, surrendering to a single, smooth pull. When it reached the ceiling, the large section detached and cascaded to the floor.

“Looks like we won’t have much trouble, Joe.”

“Spect' it’s good and ready,” Joe said from where he stood behind Will, his voice more like an instructing echo. “That ain’t the problem. Never is. The hard part comes after.”

Will took out his utility knife, sliding out the blade, and got to work.

He started by scoring one broad section at a time. The sharp edge sliced through the thick, skin-like paper, cutting into the beautiful yet worthless filagree. After he’d broken it up into more manageable parts, Will grabbed another edge and peeled it up. Despite his clean cuts, it still ripped away in jagged strip, making white gashes through the sea of red, exposed like flesh beneath a wound.

Will didn't know why, but it felt good. It was alleviating, cathartic, like taking off tight fitting clothes. And the more he removed, the more intense the sensation became.

His actions grew almost desperate after that.

With added dedication, Will zeroed in on the task at hand, nothing existing outside of it.

Section by section.

Rip by rip.

Pull by pull.

Will Graham shed the old skin.

When his efforts didn't seem like enough, Will abandoned the knife entirely and started ripping with his hands. He tore into it like a kid unwrapping a present, driven by a nameless and giddy need to reach the unknown thing beneath.

Joe watched in silence, tracking behind him but offering no help.

Two years of decay. Two years of itching. Two years of malting. Two years of watching that red wallpaper deteriorate. Two years of repairing it only to have it defiantly refuse every fix.

Why hadn't he done this sooner? Why hadn't he tore it up the first time he saw that corner? Why didn't he sate the itch the second that it started?

Somehow it seemed like this had always been what Will needed to do, even long before he had ever known that lobby existed.

It was mid-afternoon by the time he finished.

Flushed from the effort, breathing a little heavy, Will stood back for a minute, eyes roaming the renovated space. He lifted his shoulder to wipe a trickling bead of sweat from this face, euphoric with satisfaction

"Looks good, huh?" He said to Joe with a smile.

"Mighty fine, Mr. Graham. Mighty fine. Reckon it needs a double check."

Will agreed.

He inspected his work, walking along the wall while his hands—covered in paper, glue and drywall dust—skimmed the naked sheetrock. There were no remnants of paper, no globs of dried glue, no imperfections.

Except for one.

When a misstep sent him off balance, Will's hand slipped and he stumbled forward, sending his arm through the plaster wall.

“*Shit*.”

Will pulled his arm out, perturbed that he would have to fix what he'd just done, but the accident didn’t seem to match the damage.

He didn’t think that the hole had been that big, but when he looked again, he noticed how the entire section of drywall was falling apart. It was missing almost an entire panel. There was so much wall missing that Will could see the building’s wooden framework, exposing the kinked electrical wires and fiberglass insulation threaded through it.

Did he do this? Or had it been there.

It was right in front of him, right where he fell.

A huge, door-sized hole.

“Joe, you seeing this?” Will called behind him, not looking away.

“Take a closer look, Mr. Graham,” Joe replied.

Will looked up and around at the beams to ensure they weren’t about to cave in on him. To his surprise, the wood was in good condition, great condition, in fact. It was well built, sturdy and fortified.

Bracing against the beams, he popped his head through the make-shift archway and peered inside.

“There’s a hallway!” He called out to Joe, voice echoing. “Looks like it goes somewhere. I think I’ll take a look.”

“Be careful, Mr. Graham," Joe warned. "Watch where you step. It'll get dark in there.”

Will was barely listening at that point. He had already stepped inside.

It was ill-lit but bright enough to see. Treading lightly, head on a swivel, Will walked to what he thought was the end of the hall, only to be met with another passageway that split off to his right.

Strange.

For a second, Will thought about turning back. It was dark. He could barely see. The smell was rank. So he should probably turn back. It was safer to turn back. But he hesitated a second too long.

Follow.

Don’t be afraid.

It’s waiting for you.

Go and see, Billy Boy.

Will could have said no, but he didn't want to.

He turned, breached the second doorway, and followed the corridor to its end. Another doorway appeared, opening into another corridor—longer and more narrow.

Hesitation left him, along with any light.

Will knew that it was too late for him. He knew that he would never be able to turn back. The only thing left for him was to keep going forward into the darkness.

He continue, compelled by an unnamable force to follow the growing labyrinth. So he did, and as he did, the voices grew louder and more insistent.

Another turn.

Another hall.

Deeper and darker.

Further and further.

Then a light, dim in the distance, beckoned Will closer.

Like a lighthouse guiding a ship through the night, he tracked it until he reached the source.

The hall opened up into a chamber, one Will had seen before.

Bathed in florescent light, floor made of concrete, the space was empty apart from a mysterious heap at the center, high enough to be a small hill, covered in opaque plastic tarp.

Will heard his heartbeat in his ears, struggling to catch his breath, throat unable to swallow.

He knew what was under there. He had seen plenty enough to know. But who put them here? And why? Was this real? He had to be hallucinating. Right?

See for yourself.

Trembling hand reached out in front of him, Will approached the ominous mound. His shoes grated in soft skids as his feet took him closer, step by step until his fingers met the plastic. He collected a shaky handful, and in one fluid yank, he revealed what had been hidden all along.

A vicious panic ripped through his body, quaking at the sight.

Bodies.

More than one.

Dozens of bodies.

Bloated, disfigured, pale and grey, with faces that he recognized.

Victims from old crime scenes. People that he worked with at the FBI. Killers. Criminals. Convicts. Guards. Officers. Detectives. Innocent people. People he knew were dead and people he thought were still alive.

The Vergers. Garret Jacob Hobbs. Jack Crawford. Alana Bloom.

More and more and more.

How could they be here?

Were they always here? Had Will brought them? Placed them there? Had he hidden them beneath the wallpaper? Carried them with him at the center of his own structure? Did they speak to him in the night, arguing back and forth about every moral decision Will made?

Yes.

With every FBI crime scene, with every contribution to cannibalistic manipulation, with every Verger guard that stood between him and salvation, with every sacrifice he made at the alter of freedom, Will had filled this room with countless bodies. The hallow people of the past, lifeless apart from the memory, had shaped the walls of his own cage, the internal judgements from every person he had ever known, berating every decision, forever conflicting in a state of confusion that sent him retreating inside himself.

They were all there. They always had been.

At the very core of his being.

Trapping him.

Will tried to retreat but when he looked, he couldn't find the exit. The walls had sealed up around him, clanking closed the cage. His feet tried to run but stumbled under his efforts. His lungs constricted, unable to breath. Acid seized every muscle, paralyzing him. His heartbeat began to weaken. Pressure squeezed his skull.

His life blood was leaving him like smoke from a snuffed fire.

Is this how it is to end for us?

4.

"You alright, Mr. Graham?"

Will felt the weight of Joe's hand on his shoulder and his eyes flitted open.

He stood in the lobby, facing the solid wall. He took a deep inhale, searching around him as the panic subsided one returned heart beat at a time. Consciousness poured into his body, and he felt himself standing firm in his feet, grounded in reality.

Did he scream? *He thought he screamed.*

"Y-yeah, Joe. Sorry," Will said weakly, still blinking into his surroundings. "I—I think I blacked out there for a second."

Joe gave him a smile, one that made Will uneasy.

"Will?"

Will snapped his head toward the new voice, eyes landing on Hannibal who stood just inside the lobby door. He stared at Will with a strange, perplexed expression.

"Hannibal," Will said, a similar confusion crossing his face. He didn't understand why Hannibal was looking at him that way.

Hannibal took two hesitant steps toward him, sliding his keys into his pocket. "What are you doing?" He asked with concern in his voice.

Will twisted his brow for a second, still confused, then realized that perhaps he was asking about the state of the lobby. He glanced up and around at the bare walls, remembering that he hadn't told Hannibal about his plans for this renovation.

"Oh," he replied, half-laughing at himself with a pleased grin. "We finally tore up the wallpaper. Didn't we, Joe?"

"We certainly did, Billy Boy."

Will turned to look at Joe, the words enough to stun his entire body.

"What?"

Hannibal took another slow step closer. "Will," he said gently, reaching a hand out to hold his arm.

Will kept his eyes locked on the old man, ignoring Hannibal entirely. "Joe," he pressed. "What did you just call me?"

Joe didn't respond.

"Will," Hannibal said again with a degree of care and caution, stepping closer still. "Who are you talking to?"

Will retracted from his stare and looked at Hannibal, puzzled as to why he would ask such an obvious question, then looked back over at Joe.

“Joe,” he said a-matter-of-factly, gesturing toward the old man.

Hannibal followed the direction of his point then returned to look at Will. There was a bloated pause of consideration, and Hannibal tightened his grip before he delivered his next words.

“There’s no one there, Will.”

“Yes there is,” Will chuffed, dismissing it like a joke. “He’s right here.”

Will reached his hand out to grab Joe’s shoulder only to have it swing through empty space. He retracted his hand and brought it to his face, as if he expected something to be in the open palm.

“Joe?” He breathed, voice quiet and quaking, face stunned and unbelieving. “What—What’s goin on?”

Joe didn’t respond.

“Will.” Hannibal drew Will closer to his body. “Will, come with me” he coaxed, trying to guide Will toward the elevator.

“Joe!?” Will shouted, staring at the bodiless man standing right in front of him.

Joe continued to smile.

You finally did it, Billy Boy.

“He’s right there, Hannibal!” Will yelled, trying to writhe from Hannibal’s arms. “He’s speaking to me!”

There’d been some terrible mistake, some grave misunderstanding, and if he could just touch Joe again, then Hannibal would believe him.

“Hannibal look at him!”

Hannibal reasserted his grasp, wrapping both arms around the hysterical man. “Come with me,” he said calmly. “Come upstairs.”

This is the painful part, Billy Boy, but you’ll feel better in the end.

“Joe what the fuck!?” Will screamed, still trying to reach out, thrashing with the full force of his body. “Hannibal he’s fucking real!”

Left with no other option, Hannibal picked Will up and carried him onto the elevator. He tacked the young man to the wall, yanked golden gate closed, and pressed the glowing button.

Held tight against to his large chest, huffing from panic, eyes wide in terror, Will heard Hannibal speak low into his ear.

“I’m sorry for this, Will. But there is something you need to see.”

Together, the two men approached the fourth floor—the location of gruesome change.

The monster is already here.

5.

Will laid listless on the couch, the sedative making his arms heavy. He turned his head toward the center of the room, painted hazy in a milky film. It was disappearing right in front of him.

“Is this real?” He asked, tongue thick and heavy in his mouth.

“It’s not real,” Hannibal answered, hand resting on his arm. “You’re safe.”

Will watched the room around him shift and warp then vanish in a flash of white. His eyes drooped closed and he floated from the couch, up and out of the apartment. A rattle went through him, a horrifying dread, unable to turn back, and it shattered. He shattered. A million disoriented pieces.

An amalgam of viscous white, opaque and gooey, flicking and shaking, painted splatters as it closed in around his life. It mixed like oil and turpentine, pungent like ammonia, and sent him downward, closing in around his life like quicksand.

Then solidity—a wash of reassuring comfort, the sensation of being home.

He felt the weight of gravity pull him into ease. Warmth surrounded him like a blanket. His nose filled with the sent of dog, charcoal, and stone. His eyes opened and he found himself inside his home in Wolf Trap, laying on the pull-out bed in the dark living room.

“This isn’t real,” he said to himself.

“What isn’t real?”

His vision focused, finding the source of the voice.

Hannibal sat in a chair pulled close to the edge of the bed, dressed in a suit and wool coat, a notebook opened across his lap.

“Is this the dream?” he asked.

“You’re awake,” Hannibal replied. “Are you feeling alright?”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is going to answer the question I know you're asking. Hold on tight, loves!! It's about to get CRAZY!

SICK DESPERATION

Chapter Notes

Here are the remaining chapters, my loves, as they were originally written. I haven't changed much, so I hope you enjoy them; the good, the bad, and the ugly.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank each and every one of you for reading/commenting/kudoing. This story has meant a lot to me and so have all of you <3

And when wind and winter harden
all the loveless land,
It will whisper of the garden,
you will understand.

-Oscar Wilde

1.

Two fingers pressed into the unconscious man's wrist, Hannibal counted silently, listening in time with the faint ticking of a clock down the hall.

110 beats per minute.

Will's heart rate was steady, albeit elevated, but well within safe limits. A higher dose was chosen for this particular instance. Anything between 0.4mg and 0.6mg produced the desired effect. He had done this only once before. Though it had previously achieved the intended result, Hannibal could only admit, these circumstances had far more sinister implications.

He looked down at Will, laying sprawled listless and shirtless across the leather couch. It was strange to see him in such a helpless state. Gone were his furrowed brow and the stormy intensity behind his eyes. In slumber, Will appeared almost innocent—an illusion that sent an unexpected vulnerability through Hannibal, the fear of losing the man he loved.

In all his years of manipulation and control, never had Hannibal Lecter felt such trepidation as he did now, observing the altered state of the man who had become his whole world.

"Forgive me, my dear Will," he murmured, voice barely audible, fingers gently brushing stray curls from Will's dampened forehead.

Hannibal knew the risks involved in tampering with the mind's fragile balance, but such drastic measures were necessary, or so he continued to reassure himself.

But the words felt hollow, even within the confines of his own thoughts.

What was he to do?

Hannibal had no other option. It was necessary for Will to know the truth, to face what he had previously denied.

They could wait no longer.

Hannibal had hoped that over the course of their journey together in this new life that the memories of that last night in Wolf Trap would slowly reveal themselves, and one by one, Will would come to accept them as he simultaneously accepted his own darkness.

Hannibal had done everything—purchased the apartment as well as the killing floor—all in an effort to oversee Will's progress to connecting with his deepest instincts. And while those intentions had been set in love and thought out thoroughly before any action was taken, the truth was as it had always been: Hannibal Lecter remained locked to Will, despite every destructive thing, because it was he who set Will in this world, he who placed Will in the path of every choice he made, all while maintaining the hope that eventually Will would choose Hannibal of his own volition.

But of all the things Hannibal Lecter could plausibly predict, Will Graham had proven himself to be an inexplicable phenomenon, ineffable in every way.

With each passing day, the consequences of Hannibal's actions grew more significant. Will's nightmares, his sleepwalking, the auditory hallucinations, and now the full manifestation of another person, had all been a side-effect of Hannibal's choices that night in Wolf Trap. Will had suppressed the memory, cultivated it as a nightmare, transforming it into a fantasy that did not exist, and because of it, his truest self had never hatched. Will had remained stagnant, either unable or unwilling to face the truth, and Hannibal accepted that he had only prolonged Will's internal struggle by withholding what he knew, fearing the outcome, afraid that Will would finally leave.

While he would have preferred to speak to Will prior to administering such a mind altering substance, with circumstances such as they were, Hannibal chose to inject the dose without his knowledge. Other methods had a lower rate of effect whereas injection was nearly instantaneous. It came with increased risk factors, but they were negligible when compared to the necessity.

The DMT Hannibal had acquired was medical grade, suitable for situations such as this.

He checked his watch.

2 minutes.

He glanced down just as Will eyes began to shift behind closed lids, entering REM. Hannibal knew the images that would be assaulting Will's psyche – fragmented memories piecing themselves together

Though the distance between them now was merely physical—they were inextricably linked by this secret they shared—Hannibal could not ignore the overwhelming canyon that now grew between them as fate opened up one returned memory at a time.

Hannibal's thoughts inevitably drifted back to the day when they were both ensconced in the house in Wolf Trap, the night that fused them together.

The memories were vivid, haunting—a winding pathway shrouded in darkness, the bare branches of winter trees reaching out like claws. And there, nestled within the heart of the secluded glen in the woods, stood the house, its usual warmth snuffed out. The cold silence that wrapped itself around every room, insinuating itself between the cracks and crevices, fortifying the very foundation of that small house.

"Such isolation should have protected us," Hannibal lamented.

Hannibal knew that he had set into motion a chain of events that would forever alter the course of their intertwined destinies. The transformation he had initiated came at a price, and the true cost had yet to be revealed.

He recalled with vivid clarity the night when he obeyed Will's request to leave, feeling the loneliness that enveloped him as he walked away.

"Goodbye, Hannibal," Will had whispered, so steadily paced, so sure of himself.

Hannibal had complied at first, though hesitantly.

But even that had been a farce.

In his absence, Will had been left with a deceptive sense of control—one that had taken root in the wake of Hannibal's departure. It had given Will the opportunity to breathe, to explore a false sense of freedom. But it was a fragile thing, this newfound autonomy; it teetered precariously on the edge of a knife, waiting for the moment when it would be shattered into a thousand pieces.

Control was an illusion—*it always had been.*

When Hannibal returned later that evening, it seemed such an easy manipulation, but he still recalled how he hesitated over the door handle, his breath misting in the frigid air as he stood before the entrance of the house.

He could still see Will's face, tinged with doubt and fear as Hannibal slid the syringe into his skin, administering the exact same dose of DMT to send him through yet another deception. With each carefully crafted word, Hannibal rewrote their story, ensuring, at least he believed at the time, the ending he wanted.

Such mind altering drugs were effective at these types of re-workings of the past, the pink-ish powder among the most perfect as it was quick and left very little memory of the experience afterward. Within a span of 20 minutes, Hannibal managed to convince Will that he was responsible for the murder of the Vergers, the murder of Alana Bloom, and the murder of Jack Crawford, and that Hannibal's unannounced return was all in part to save Will from his impending fate.

When Will woke from the specifically induced trip through an altered state of mind, though Hannibal had predicted a great many things, he could not have expected what came next.

2.

“Is this the dream?” Will asked.

“You’re awake,” Hannibal replied. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I-I don’t know," Will sat up, scooting back to lean against the wall and window. *"I think—"* he looked around, the room seeming so real in only the most distant way. *"—I’ve done this before, haven't I?”* he asked Hannibal.

Hannibal folded his notebook, sliding the pen between the pages, and set it aside. *"Yes,"* he answered, clasping his hands together and draping them in his lap.

Will narrowed his eyes. *“Are you real?”*

“This is a memory," Hannibal replied, looking up and around the room.

Will mirrored the inspection. *“And we’re in Wolf Trap,"* he said, understanding that yes, he was in Wolf Trap, if only in his mind.

“Our last night of this life," Hannibal stated, returning to latch onto Will's gaze.

A shiver wracked Will's body and he crossed his arms, rubbing them. *“I told you, Hannibal,"* he said soft but firm. *"I don’t want to remember this.”*

“You must.”

“But this isn’t how this happened," Will asserted, looking from under his brow. *"I told you to leave. I remember that.”*

"Yes," Hannibal replied, *"but I returned later that day."*

"Why did you do that?"

Will didn't have to ask that question. He already knew the answer. He knew just as he knew he was in a drugged state now, that Hannibal had drugged him back then and that's why he

both couldn't and refused to remember.

He peered up at Hannibal.

"I'm not proud of my actions," the dark man replied, sounding sincere.

"I didn't do any of those things, did I? Alana. Margot. Jack."

For one brief moment, Hannibal dropped his gaze. *"No."*

"And after, after you drugged me, convinced me, manipulated me...I woke up?"

Hannibal nodded.

"What happened next?"

"You asked me to sit with you."

"Will you sit with me?" Will heard himself say, a quiet fear returning to his body, trembling with the new knowledge of his crimes.

Hannibal stood from the chair, unbuttoning his coat and dropping it from his shoulders before approaching the bed. As he sank into the mattress, Will's hand slid up his arm, gentle like an ask, clutching once it settled.

"I have nowhere else to go, do I?" Will said, crystal eyes glistening in the darkening night, crisp and cold with wet tears.

"You have everywhere to go, Will," Hannibal offered, scooting in closer to try an hold him. "The options are limitless. It is moments such as these that allow us to construct the life we've always wanted, built from the ashes of our burned selves."

"They'll come for me," Will murmured somewhat desperately, still reaching.

Some type of darkness coated Hannibal's maroon eyes, like the night, black. "Yes," he replied, drawing their bodies closer.

"This house, this life, it'll be nothing more than a memory by tomorrow."

"This is a rebirth."

"You'd go with me?"

"I'd grant you any wish, Will," Hannibal said, his words like silk. "You need only ask."

Then and there, Will made a choice. It was a decision appointed from perfect clarity, provoked by a conscious awakening, full to the brim with a feeling Will could only describe as love.

"I want you inside me," he said with whispering severity. He clutched the back of Hannibal's neck, bringing their foreheads together. "Reshape me," he demanded, breath hitching over

every vowel.

Hannibal tightened his arms around Will's desperate body. "Give yourself to me," he uttered into Will's open mouth. "I'll take care of you."

"You did this?" Will asked. *"Manipulated me to this?"*

"I did not," Hannibal answered. *"When you spoke to me in these moments, you were lucid. I did not coerce you."*

"But you could have stopped."

"You didn't want me to."

"So everything, every time I retracted from you physically, I feared that I was making the same choice and I wasn't sure if that was my choice."

"It's always been your choice, Will."

Their lips met, slotting together with fevered passion, pulling one soul from the other's body, breaking only for Hannibal to ask, "are you certain, Will? Once we cross this threshold, there will be no turning back."

"Please, Hannibal," Will murmured, the warmth of his desire burning so bright it was painful.

"Do you trust me?" Hannibal asked his eyes locked with Will's as he guided him to lie down.

Will nodded, not even blinking.

"Close your eyes," Hannibal instructed, his fingers working diligently to begin undressing them both. "And focus on your breath – slow, even inhales and exhales."

Will obeyed, his heart pounding in his ears as he surrendered to the process. As he breathed, he felt his awareness heighten, each sensation magnified: the whisper of chill against his skin, the heat radiating from inside every cell, the weight of Hannibal's body pressing down on him.

The straps cinched tight around his wrists and ankles, opening him and exposing him in ways he'd not ever understood.

Eyes wide, throat choked in fear, he felt Hannibal's large cock slide into him as everything went white beneath the confines of a white plastic bag.

"Ah! Hannibal!" he tried to moan out, his voice reverberating against the plastic.

"Shhhh," Hannibal continued, thrusting slow and deep, his voice a gentle command. "Feel your old self slip away, like a nymph shedding its skin, leaving behind only the remnants of who you once were."

As Will tried to concentrate on his diminishing breath, held captive by the shrinking space between his face and the crinkling white, the room seemed to fade away, replaced by an all-encompassing darkness that threatened to swallow him whole. Yet within that void, there was also a sense of liberation, as if he was stepping out of the confines of his past and into the vast expanse of the unknown.

Hannibal tightened his grip ever so gradually, each constriction sending a shiver of anticipation coursing through Will's veins. Hannibal's hand wrapped around Will's cock, stroking him to the edge. Will heard his words muffled next to his ear.

"Yes, mylimasis. Let go,"

With each passing moment, the air grew thinner, weaker, until it was gone entirely, Will trapped inside an airless void.The world seemed to shrink around him as his breath grew more labored, the edges of his vision darkening like the encroaching shadows of twilight. The panic that previously clawed at his chest was swiftly overtaken by a strange sense of tranquility, as if the suffocating darkness were merely a cocoon from which he would soon emerge. Death rose like bile in his throat, but before it could consume him, a voice cut through the darkness:

"Open your mouth, Will. Be reborn."

And just as Will teetered on the precipice of suffocation, his lips parted and a knife slid between them, cutting open an airway for Will to breath, the tight pressure suddenly releasing, leaving him gasping for air as waves of euphoria washed over him, cum spurting across his chest and torso. Hannibal filled him as his body trembled with the intensity of the sensation, every fiber of his burning, alight with the fire of transformation.

The sensation was nothing short of euphoric – a surge of pure, unadulterated bliss that coursed through his body like liquid fire, igniting every nerve ending in its path.

As the aftershocks of his release rippled through him, Will looked up at Hannibal with a newfound sense of clarity, his eyes shining with gratitude and devotion. They had taken a daring step into the unknown, bound together by their love and the shared knowledge that the consequences of their actions would forever haunt them. Yet in this moment, they were free – free to carve out a path through the darkness and forge a love that transcended both time and space.

"Let the unknown come," Hannibal whispered fiercely, his fingers tangling in Will’s hair as he drew him down into a searing kiss.

"Is this what it's like?" Will asked breathlessly, his eyes locked onto Hannibal's as if seeking an anchor in the storm of sensations that threatened to engulf him. "To be reborn?"

Hannibal smiled enigmatically, his fingers tracing the curve of Will's jaw with a tenderness that belied the darkness within him. "It is an approximation," he replied softly, leaning closer until their lips were mere inches apart. "A taste of the freedom we shall find together."

Will watched the room around him shift and warp then vanish in a flash of white. His eyes drooped closed and he floated from the bed, up and out of the house. A rattle went through him, a horrifying dread, unable to turn back, and it shattered. He shattered.

A million disoriented pieces.

An amalgam of viscous white, opaque and gooey, flicking and shaking, painted splatters as it closed in around his life. It mixed like oil and turpentine, pungent like ammonia, and sent him upward, expanding his life into endlessness.

Then solidity—a wash of reassuring comfort, the sensation of being whole.

Will's heart hammered in his chest, the cold sweat that clung to his skin making him shiver despite the warmth of the room, and his eyes shot open.

The night had swallowed the city whole, leaving nothing but a tenuous veil of moonlight to illuminate through the vertical casement windows.

The treachery sat like a wet lump in the back of Will's throat, and he swallowed with a blink, sending a tear from the corner of his eye.

"Will?" Hannibal's voice, smooth and laced with concern.

“I’m fine," Will replied sharply, though he knew his words rang hollow. He glanced sideways at Hannibal when the man reached for him, but immediately slapped his hands away. "Get off me!”

“Will." Hannibal said firmly. "I understand your anger, but the decision is already made. We can face whatever challenges lie ahead—together—as we always have."

Will said nothing, simply scoffed under his breath. He shot up from the couch and grabbed his shirt from the coffee table, slipping it on in two aggressive yanks. He went for the foyer, snatching up his keys and pulling on his jacket as he slid on his shoes.

“Where are you going?” Hannibal called.

But Will had already left the apartment.

ENFILADE

1.

There were craters of space in his story when Will Graham would look back and laugh at his own naivety.

In light of Hannibal's treachery, returning to Cooper would become one of those moments. At the time, it seemed to him that fate and circumstance had brought him to this moment, one tea-cup shattering and another solidifying.

He was angry, terrified, settled in the slight that manifested into his entire relationship with Hannibal, and the long journey from Brooklyn back into the Manhattan seemed like one that merged his two worlds into one depressing blob of futility.

At least, it felt that way.

How very little he expected of what he would discover in the early hours of morning at Cooper Kennedy's penthouse.

He would have unlocked that large wooden door himself, if he had the time. But before he could even retrieve his keys from his pocket, Cooper, probably alerted from his ride up in the elevator, swung the front door open in an abrupt panic.

"Fuck, Will. Baby—*fuck*."

He was wearing nothing but his overly tight boxer briefs, face white as a sheet, the remnants of cocain still clinging to his nostrils. He looked similar, Will would recall, to the morning he had arrived *'from Philly*' to receive the death of his uncle. When he pulled Will in from the hallway, slamming the door behind them, and gathered him in a somewhat desperate hug, Will could feel the large man's heart thudding rapidly.

"*I'm sorry*," Cooper said, voice cracking like a teenage boy. "*Fuck*—I'm sorry. I was going to call you."

"Coop," Will said, face twisted in confusion, barely hugging him back. He pulled from the tight grip and looked at the tall, disheveled man. "What are you doing? What's going on?"

Cooper kept both large hands on Will's shoulders, his eyes reddening, growing glassy as they filled with tears. "You can't be mad," he said. Actually he asked more than said.

"What?"

A tear fell down Cooper's cheek. "I didn't know this would happen," he gasped.

Will's eyes darted back and forth between the green irises, completely baffled, never having seen Cooper cry before. "Cooper—what the fuck are you talking about?"

Cooper released him, dropping both hands only to send them through his hair, looking toward the hallway.

The bedroom.

Will might of known. He would think back and recall that he already knew.

That's how he would later tell the story.

The truth was, he really was taken completely by surprise.

He cut his eyes to Cooper who gave him a knowing, if not distraught, look. Will didn't even take his jacket off, just stomped down the hall, his speed just under a jog, Cooper's heavy footfalls trailing behind him.

"Will, wait!" he called.

But it was too late.

Will turned the corner to enter the bedroom he once identified as *theirs*, to find a wide-eyed, pallor and lifeless, Gustav laying in the center of bundled and soiled grey satin sheets. His neck bore the bruises of strangulation, his ribs crushed inward, mouth stained with speckles of blood. Cooper had done just as predicted, had done just what Charles Litchman wanted him to do—he had strangled Gustav during sex.

Will dropped his arms from the doorway, laughing as he ran his hand over his face.

"What's so funny?" Cooper asked, both aggravated and worried.

"Nothing," Will said, reaching across the bed to check Gus' pulse, unsurprised when he found none. He stood back up, still smiling, rubbing his face and jaw. "This is probably the sexiest thing you've ever done," he finished, looking over at Cooper.

"What?"

"You wanna fuck right now?"

Cooper's brow twisted in shock and disgust. "*What the fuck?* Will, do you see what's fucking happening right now!? I need you to help me get rid of the body!"

Will felt a type of power he never had in his entire life, suddenly stronger than Cooper had ever been, and he couldn't help but continue to antagonize. "Yeah I get that—we can fuck first though—he'll still be there."

Cooper's eyebrows sank between his reddened eyes. *"Are you fucking insane?!"*

What a funny question. In that moment, Will realized how both these men in his life were traitors, that they had both betrayed him—constantly. He realized they were awful men, but somehow that was just fine, because he, too, was an awful man.

“Yeah, I’m a fucking psychopath, but you knew that already," he replied.

"Are you kidding me right now?"

Hannibal’s full honesty and Cooper’s full honesty were literally staring Will in the face. The entire plan, from start to finish, the entire journey, had been a success, and Will was suddenly beholden to no one, free from everyone's grasp. And in that moment of clairity, filled with his regained agency, Will Graham knew exactly what he wanted.

“I need to call Hannibal.”

“Why *the fuck* do you need to call *Hannibal?*”

“We have experience with this type of thing, remember?” Will said nonchalantly as he tapped his phone and brought it to his ear. “That article you read about me? Well, turns out, I really am a fucked up guy.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Will held up his finger as the phone rang.

“Hey, Hannibal. Can you come to Cooper’s please?” Will smiled. “Don’t get too excited, just get over here. Oh, and Hannibal—bring your bag.”

“Bring his bag?” Cooper asked, eyes still as wide as saucers. “What the fuck is happening!?” he huffed in a panic.

“Copper listen to me,” Will said as he stepped to Cooper, sliding both hands up to cup his worried face. “I need you to keep it together.”

Then Cooper Kennedy did the exact opposite

“Oh fucking gawd Will!” he sobbed, dropping to his knees and hugging Will’s torso, face pressing into his belly. “Please don’t leave me. I’m so fucking sorry I can’t be without you.”

Will blinked over an eye roll, grabbing Cooper’s arms and unwrapping the man.

“We have a bigger issue right now—so calm the fuck down.”

Wait for the door call.
0571
Silver button to alert the front desk.
0571
Black button to send down the elevator.
0571
Unlock the front door.

Will grabbed the brass knob and yanked with dynamic force, the suctioned air dislodging a solitary curl.

Hannibal grinned. "You called for a doctor?"

Will smirked with matched enthusiasm. "Don't start."

Will lead him down the hall, ushering with open arm to the crime scene that was now, and always ever would be, Cooper's bedroom.

"What happened?" Hannibal asked calmly to the man pacing in the corner.

"I-I don't know I," Cooper stuttered, so unlike anything he had ever been in Hannibal's prescence. "I did it before once at a party with Charles and everything went fine I don't know what—" he trailed off, sending hands through his hair "—*fuck*. Pop's gonna fucking kill me."

Will thought that was hilarious. This 45 year old man, worried like a teenager who'd just wrecked his dad's car. The Kennedys really did live in a delusional world.

"Does Charles know Gustav came here tonight?" Hannibal asked.

Cooper said nothing, just stared.

"COOPER!" Will snapped.

"I-I don't know, ok. I never did this with Gus but after the shit that happened in Louisana he said he'd come over but I-I-I don't know if Charles sent him or not."

"Where's his phone?" Hannibal asked, looking around.

"Um—I—I don't know," Cooper continued to stutter.

"Cooper, focus," Will snapped again, drawing the large man's eyes to him. "Where is his phone?"

"Over—over here," Cooper walked to Gustav's bag and pulled out his phone from the front pocket.

"How much contact did you have over the phone?" Hannibal inquired, looking at the screen.

"None, that I know of. He-he arrived and…"

“You got right to it, huh?” Will chuffed, looking over Hannibal’s shoulder as he scrolled the contents of Gustav’s phone.

“No outgoing or inbound calls. He’ll not have been pinged at this location,” Hannibal said, breaking off the back, removing the SIM card, cracking it, then dropped the phone into the nearest glass of water. He then retrieved his own phone from his pocket and dialed.

It rang twice.

“Yes, Charlie! I’m looking for Gustav. Another client is asking for him, I’m afraid.”

“Oh Gus? I don’t know where he is,” Charles voice echoed through the reciever. “He’s been flakey. I wouldn’t expect to see much of him.”

“Thank you, Charles. We’ll speak soon.” Hannibal hung up the phone. “He sent Gustav here on purpose.”

“What!?” Cooper exlaimned.

“He was trying to incriminate you,” Will said, walking over to Cooper, once again reasserting his focus. “Listen, we’ll clean up this mess and take care Litchman. In exchange, you’ll let me go. *It’s been a long time coming, Cooper. You know that.*"

Cooper, eyes, filled to the brim with tears, meekly nodded.

“Yeah, I’m gonna need more than that, Coop.”

“Fine. Consider it fucking done.”

3.

Will and Hannibal rolled Gustav's body from the bed and dragged him into the sleek-lined bathroom.

The sensation was a beautiful one, Will noticed as Hannibal propped his ex-lover against the wall of the shower and started to disrobe. He was inside a space that held so many tortured moments of feigned intimacy, the mornings of sex beneath the cascading water when Cooper would press him into the slate-tile. Now that space would be coated in a varnish, washed in the blood of Gustav's sacrifice, made clean by the true intimacy he and Hannibal were about to share.

He sat down on the toilet, rolled his pants up to the knee, and stepped into the shower to help Hannibal harvest the organs.

Cooper stood hugging himself, leaned against the doorframe. “And that will help?” he asked, quivering.

Both men looked back at him simultaneously, then at each other with a small smile, eyes glinting with pride, then continued what they were doing.

As Hannibal finished extracting the last of the organs and set them aside in a stainless steel bowl, Will stepped forward to take his turn. Soon he was slicing neatly through flesh and sinew, each cut smooth and precise.

It was strange. The moment wasn't as he expected.

It was not overwhelming like Will thought it would be. No sensations flooded or caught fire to burn through him, taking him to a supernatural plane.

No.

Instead, it expanded his awareness of what he previously thought to be a limited ability in a limited existence.

The universe was spoken of as ineffable—there were inexplicable concepts and notions and theories and postulates, but driving the knife through Gustav's flesh to reveal blood, under the horrified gaze of the man who had hurt him repetitively, somehow explained everything in the finest and most precise detail, aligning all chaos into a singular knowledge that Will now possessed with Hannibal.

When he looked up at Hannibal for a moment, both blood drenched, in an instant, Will was nowhere else but right there, inside the moment, feeling himself to the fullest capacity. Together, he and Hannibal were completely alive. Not floating from earth into space or a million places at once—they were resolutely inside their biological forms.

Will realized how easily death came for such a mortal shell, short and fleeting, yet here he sat with power over life.

His life became important—real, more magical and bright. Nothing felt calmer, more soothing, more stoic and focused, more resolved. Every emotion was a neurological path that was specifically chosen. Every fact that had ever been stored away was organized and accessible. The movement of his body was projected from the mind with direct yet innate command and every thought, emotion, movement, action, synced into once cohesive force—the weapon that was his humanity.

This was what Hannibal wanted to show Will.

Morality was not the brush by which God painted the universe, but instead *it was human nature that dictated all things*.

When they were finished, the bathroom was a scene of carnage. Blood covered the walls and floor, and the air was thick with the smell of death.

It was, *Beautiful.*

They cleaned up their mess, disposed of what was necessary and packed the rest into Hannibal's black bag. As they exited the bathroom, Will felt a sense of clarity he had never experienced before.

Will Graham was free, truly free, and the moments that followed were all to show thanks to Hannibal Lecter for all he had done.

“So here’s the deal, Coop," Will said, walking over to Cooper as he removed his engagement ring and watch. "You’re going to be fine. No one will know. No one will ask. In a week, you’re going to announce that you’ve called off our engagement." Will drew open one of Cooper's hands and put both items inside, folding the fingers back over to clasp them. "By that time," he said darkly from under his brow, "Hannibal and I will be long gone."

“Will, please,” Cooper gathered Will into him, brow upturned, more terrified Will had ever seen him. “Please.” He took both large hands and cupped Will's face, the cold silver and diamonds pressing against Will’s cheek. “You don’t want to do this. You want to stay here." His voice lowered to a sweet and sincere whisper, that beautiful twinkling tone, his yellow-green eyes begging with the last effort they could muster. "You don’t want that life with him, you don’t," he said. "Please—Stay.”

Will brought his hands over Cooper’s, letting his cheek rest into one of the large palms before pulling away. He brought the two hands together and dropped them at Cooper's side.

“You’re alive, Cooper. You should be grateful for that.”

Cooper tried to kiss him, pressed his lips to Will’s, trying to pull out any affection he hoped was in there.

But Will didn’t press back. He had nothing to offer. He let his forehead rest against Cooper’s, closing his eyes.

"Goodbye, Cooper."

As he started to walk away, Cooper clutched his finger tips.

“Will.”

Their eyes met and perhaps the truest form of Cooper Kennedy that existed, the meek little boy who had never received it asked,

“Did you ever love me?”

He paused only for a second then dropped the large man’s hand, and with that, Will Graham left Cooper Kennedy’s penthouse for the final time.

CICADA SONG

1.

Will flopped back onto the bare mattress, blowing out a sigh as he went. He strummed his fingers on his belly, looking up at the ceiling fan as it shifted through light filtering in through the vertical casement window. It was hot in the apartment for nighttime, but that was fine. Will just wanted to lay there. He listened to the fan hum softly, the whispering breaths of Hannibal sat beside him, smelled the slight coffee scent wafting up from downstairs. For all the commotion happening outside, the inside of the apartment was peaceful—as silent as safety.

Will's eyelids started to droop.

He listened for a moment for all the internal dialogues that once plagued him, finding his mind as serene as the now empty apartment.

They had spent the previous day dispatching Litchman, leaving the scene for those who would find him, then drinking the remaining wine from the chiller as they cleared their apartment, readying themselves to vanish in the early morning light.

What few things they chose to take with them packed neatly into one solitary box, awaiting them in marble foyer.

Will smiled behind closed eyelids, thinking of how, once again, he would take very little of one life into the next. It was comforting, that sensation.

He sent a hand up Hannibal’s back, sitting up. Hannibal shifted slightly, his back muscles rippling under Will's arm, and Will couldn't help but move closer to him, letting out a contented sigh.

Will pressed a kiss to Hannibal’s neck, and Hannibal turned to return the simple, effortless token.

It made him smile again. He realized that didn’t need anything, not anymore. Everything he wanted—everything he needed—breathed deeply beneath his arm.

“The last of this life,” Hannibal murmured, as if he were listening to Will’s thoughts, resting his forehead against Will’s. “How do you feel?”

Will closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them again, he met the cherry red blooms of Hannibal’s irises, thankful.

“Ready,” he said softly. “I feel ready.”

“So much time spent, only to arrive as we did the very first day,” Hannibal mused.

“Beginnings and endings,” Will agreed.

“Samsara,” Hannibal smiled.

Will laughed gently, nodding his head against Hannibal before returning to kiss him.

They’d come so far, and here they sat, awaiting the very end, unafraid.

Unlike the previous time, the rumbling of the elevator arriving did not panic or scare Will.

When they heard it, Hannibal separated from the kiss, opening his eyes, hand caressing Will’s face.

“He’s here.”

Will smiled and kissed Hannibal’s palm. “I know.”

They both stood in unison.

Hannibal rested a hand on Will’s chest and offered one final kiss as the lift arrived and the keys jangled in the lock.

“He’ll be armed," Hannibal said.

“I know," Will replied.

“Be careful.”

“I promise.”

Cooper came fumbling through the door, reeking of liquor, beard unshaven, hand trembling over the gun held at the end of his outstretched arm. His red, glassy eyes cut across the apartment, discovering its vacant state.

“All packed up and ready to go baby?” Cooper spat, words slurring. “I guesssyou two ffucked already, huh!? Ready to run from the law now!?”

Will was the first to step forward, calm, hands held gently in front of him. “Cooper,” he said, “don’t do this. Don’t embarrass yourself.”

“I’m not fucking embarrassing myself!" Cooper yelled, trying to stand firm in his feet. He drew his chin up, steady in his gaze, and cleared his throat before saying, “I’m here to make my final plea.”

“With a gun drawn?" Hannibal interjected. "Seems not like a plea so much as a demand, Mr. Kennedy.”

“Shut the fuck up, Lecter!”

“Cooper, you I’m not listening to any plea. I’ve made my choice and you need to go," Will offered as a kindness, “while you still can."

Cooper looked at him somberly, his chin and lower lip trembling. The man truly was in anguish, Will could tell. He had seen it before. The large man dropped his raised arm and approached Will, voice loud but words pleading.

“He’ll leave you,” he started. “His money will leave you! Whatever you think he is or has that’s keeping you here will eventually end!” His voice grew into a yell, frantic and chaotic, tears streaming down his face. He grabbed Will’s face again, convinced there was still tenderness in those icy blue eyes. “I know you loved me, Will. I know you did. I’ve seen it in you, I’ve been inside you. I know it’s there,” he finished, reaching for Will’s lips.

And with that Hannibal Lecter tackled Cooper Kennedy to the ground.

Will watched Hannibal’s muscles flex as he struggled to hold Cooper down. Hannibal’s eyes met Will’s, and they shared a silent understanding.

This had to end. They refused to keep looking over their shoulders, waiting for someone to come after them. This was the final moment, the final decision, the final fight for the final freedom.

Will walked over quickly to retrieve the gun from Cooper’s hand. Cooper struggled against Hannibal’s grip, nearly launching Hannibal, sending him to the wall. Cooper ran at Will, dodging a shot as he managed to tackle the much smaller man. He wrangled the gun from Will just as Hannibal stood.

Cooper quickly outstretching his arm and fired off a shot just as Hannibal leapt to the kitchen. The bullet hit Hannibal's shoulder, causing him to stumble. He clutched his grazed arm as blood poured from the wound as he made it way toward the fire escape, leaping out just as Cooper fired off two more shots, missing him entirely.

“WHERE YOU GOING LECTER, HUH!?”

Cooper chased after him, and Will made it to his feet just as the large man hit the ground, both of their footsteps fading as they chased each other down the street.

The night was warm, wet from a fresh rain, cars and people making their way through the evening humidity. Hannibal dodged person after person, Cooper following in behind, shoving the same people completely out of his way. Some screamed, some ran, some watched.

They made it across N 8th Street.

Cooper let off another shot, parting the sea of people without care, and clipped Hannibal's calf. Hannibal fell to the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street, stumbling and turning around to find Cooper approaching, weapon drawn.

“You think you’re the saint, Lecter!” Cooper yelled, his voice echoing through the passing horns and traffic. The night air pulled through his disheveled hair, his brooding eyes

streaming with tears, pupils dark and menacing. He entered the intimate space, towering high above Hannibal, quietening with severity. "You think all men like me are evil. When it comes down to you and me, I make the world a better place, and you take lives that don't belong to you. You don't belong here, where gods dwell."

Hannibal grunted and gritted his teeth, but said nothing.

Then like crystal, like silver bells, like a beautiful song sprouting from the chaotic city sounds, Will Graham's voice echoed.

"Cooper!"

Cooper, stunned, turned around quickly, finding Will standing on the opposite sidewalk.

"Will?" He beckoned.

They look at each other across the midnight street, cars pulling their hair in waves, locked in a deep gaze, lights reflecting in their dark eyes.

"I love you," Will said.

Face softening, arms dropping, hypnotized by the sound of those words, Cooper Kennedy stepped out onto the street without looking. The car smashed into him at high velocity, painting the asphalt with his blood.

Will looked down at the broken man then up at Hannibal, and smiled.

THE BILLY BOY MURDERS

1.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter, sat naked on the cool metal folding chair, enjoying the last of his love's unfinished cigarette while he watched Will Graham walk around the living room, circling the bare mattress.

His movements were cruel and efficient.

It was a dance—one of knowledge and of experience.

The body of Will's lifeless victim lay in the middle, blood beginning to pool into a single puddle, beginning to soak through the fibers, chest pried open, ribs splayed, and Will sent his hand in to retrieve the glistening red heart. He brought it to his lips, kissing it with kindness, then sank his teeth into the yielding flesh.

Hannibal looked at Will as the young man's face turned red and his jaw gritted together, lips pulled back, exposing clenched teeth in a deep, rumbling scream as he retched up his second mouthful of raw heart, eyes boring into Cooper Kennedy's flayed chest cavity, the torn and mangled muscles.

Hannibal rose from his chair, crawling in behind Will, kissing his cheek, nuzzling Cooper's still warm flesh with his lips before enjoying a bite, and they made love over the cadaver's remains, feeding upon the rich dead.

This was their killing room floor, the location of dark change, the malevolent awakening, the place where Will Graham became his truest self, and there, with his cock plunging in and out of Hannibal Lecter, their bodies painted crimson with the fresh blood of Cooper Kennedy, the two finally became one.

2.

It wasn't enough, feasting upon Cooper.

Not for Will.

He wouldn’t be followed, not into the next life.

The Kennedy mansion was dark that night, as if it had been waiting for Will and Hannibal to arrive.

Of course, *that was the truth.*

The Kennedys had been waiting for a moment like this their entire existence, since their family first stole the land from indigenous nations and called it their own. They had built their city, their empire, upon the backs of smaller peoples, forever tallying up a debt that had finally come due.

Dean Kennedy’s office was dark, illuminated only his computer screen, when Will and Hannibal walked in, gun drawn.

“My son, my only son, is dead, is that right?” Dean asked, head sunk between his shoulders.

“We need you to call off the guard, Dean,” Will said firmly. “We’re leaving the city. You’ll never see us again.”

Dean opened his phone and pressed a few buttons before bringing it to his face. “You’ll be dead before the sun rises—"

BANG

Brain splattered the bookshelves behind Dean, head flopping back, body going limp, arm dropping the phone to the floor.

Will would remember the sight for the rest of his life. The memory would still haunt him years later.

Carol stood in the doorway, smoking gun in hand, a tear cascading down his sunken cheek. She went over to her dead husband and picked the phone up off the floor.

“Yes, Jeff? We won’t need your services tonight. Have your men stand down.”

“Carol,” Will whispered, taking a few slow steps toward her.

She reeled her neck back and swallowed, another tear streaming down her face. “I’ve called the police. They should spend several hours here before they start looking for the intruders,” she said before she cut her eyes over, and there in the early dark, Carol Kennedy spoke the last words she ever would to Will Graham. “Now, please. Get out the fuck out of my house.”

Hannibal took the gun from her hand, kisses the top of her hand, and the two men escaped into the night.

Somewhere on the highway, as Route 12 spreads toward the winding roads of The Smokey Mountains, Hannibal Lecter had one hand draped over the steering wheel, his other hand resting on Will Graham's thigh.

They realized how similar the journey was to the one they made two years and three months ago, and there was a vague sense of, why didn't we do this sooner.

But they couldn't be there if they hadn't been to New York. The road they were on could only be reached by crossing the road that came before. The journey was what is was, and all Will Graham could think at that moment, eyes cast to the changing landscape, is how he was content to traverse the wretched earth, so long as Hannibal Lecter was at his side.

EPILOGUE

"Tragedy struck Manhattan today as renown criminal defense lawyer, and youngest of the family lineage, Cooper Kennedy, was found dead, brutally mutilated in a Williamsburg apartment building. His father, Andrew Dean Kennedy, was found at the Kennedy Estate shot through the head after intruders broke into the family mansion.

Police say they are looking into these murders in connection with the recent discovery of Charles Litchman, also found brutally mutilated inside his apartment in SoHo. Litchman, Cooper Kennedy's top client, was standing trial for the strangulation of 8 young men and women. This all comes after the death of Patrick James Kennedy, ex-executive of JM Jordan, following allegations of his involvement in one of the world's largest human trafficking rings.

Marsha Thorndike, The Kennedy Family spokesperson, held a press conference today and stating, in part for the family's sole remaining beneficiary, Carol Ivette Kennedy: "Our family has suffered an irrevocable loss, one that may never be explained. We will mourn this tragedy, as will the community who continued to rely on these great men for philanthropy, generosity, safeguarding, and justice. This city was better place because of them, and we strive to maintain this great legacy in their absence. They will be greatly missed."

They never did solve those cases. Some called the allusive killers, *The Deadly Doctors*, due to the precision used to dissect the corpses. This always assumed there was more than one killer. Then there was *The Billy Boy Murders*, which was popular among Reddit users and online criminal tabloids, and assumed that there was one man who was at the center of every single kill, and that was Cooper Kennedy's ex-fiancé.

Beverly Katz only heard the headlines, she never read the articles. She knew enough to recognize she didn't want to know anymore, especially if it was a lie.

They would ask her about it later, a hundred thousand times, and Beverly died at the age of 84 with Solene holding her hand never once having spoken a bad word about Will Graham. When they'd ask about Billy Boy and the gruesome murders on Berry & N 8th Street, she would tell the story of a man who sat on the shipyard walls, eating drinking his coffee in silence–about the man who polished his nuts and bolts before going home–a man who drank pink wine with her out on the fire escape, innocently asking about the inner workings of love.

The truth was, Beverly didn't just remember him that way. She knew, deep in her heart, that Will was that man, killer or not. The two didn't have to be mutually exclusive. She knew that the man may have never stood a chance against his dark nature, but that didn't mean the lightness didn't exist.

Somewhere she imagined a place where Will finally found what he was looking for, a serenity and resolution to the two personalities at war. She knew who Hannibal Lecter was– after the headlines ran–but she didn't care. Will had loved him, and all she could hope was that at some point in their short life in that apartment in Williamsburg Brooklyn, that Hannibal had loved him back.

Several days after the headlines ran, Beverly visited the apartment where the police questioned her, and she took a final moment to walk the blood stained floors.

"Ms. Katz?"

Beverly looked up to find, what she assumed anyway, was an older detective addressing her. "Yes?" She said.

"I'm sorry but you'll have to leave now. There's no reason to force you out, but this is still a crime scene," the man said, gently, but his voice was deep and gruff. "I don't think we met," he offered his hand. "Jack Crawford."

"Beverly," she replied with a smile. "Nice to meet you."

"You look strangely familiar. I don't remember interviewing you."

"The other cops did—and they really put me through it."

"You were a friend of Will Graham?" Mr. Crawford asked.

"Yeah," she replied.

"Interesting man," he mused, eyes trailing around the floor and walls.

Beverly smiled, thinking of her friend with affection. She would miss him. "Interesting is only the half of it," she offered.

"Strictly off the record—I'm more curious than anything," Mr. Crawford started, taking a step closer to her, hands clasped in front of him. "Why do you think he did it? Why New York? Why now?"

Beverly looked back into the apartment, barren, stained with blood, then back at Mr. Crawford. She thought about telling the truth, but she didn't want to. She felt like the truth was for Will to keep, alone. "There's no rhyme or reason to this type of thing," she said, brushing off the question. "You'll dig a hole for yourself."

"I suppose you're right." Jack smiled and started walking off.

"I can tell you this though," she said, stopping him just before he left. "He deserves more than what will be said of him. This— " she said gesturing arounds her. "—this wasn't all him."

"Mr. Graham was turned evil, Ms. Katz. He had the capacity to stop."

Something rose up inside her—refused those words, and with that Beverly Katz took several hard steps toward Jack Crawford and made one final defense of a man she knew and loved.

“You think if he chose this then that says something about him–like maybe that bad negates all good. There is no good or evil, Mr. Crawford. Will Graham was who he was.”

Jack Crawford scowled at her. “I hope for your sake, you never know the real story.”

“The real story?" she said, certain. "No one knows the real story.”

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